

THE *Queen's* CURSE



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By

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my editors Martine Jackson and Kate Johnson for their suggestions and help, my friend and graphic designer Kirsty Fossengen for the cover and last but not least I would like to thank my wife for her love and support.

This book is dedicated to my parents, Emmy and Johan who unfortunately did not live long enough to see this published, but they are with me always. I hope I've done them proud.

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CHAPTER 1

AWAKENING

Misery on a spring morning; the morning of my awakening

Full awareness of the pain and revealed lies

That morning an end came to my sleeping state.

When I was thrown back into those mystery games ...

Morning had begun to spread its foggy wings over Ceartas; a land of golden hills and luscious green woods. The colours would change with the seasons; warm reddish colours in the autumn. Now that spring was here, a bright sparkling fresh green dominated the landscape. Flowers of every colour imaginable seemed to raise their tiny heads; in the dense woods, the hilly meadows and even the cultivated fields. It was a time of new life, a time of transformation.

A luminous red sun rose slowly above the hills and valleys of Ceartas, revealing minuscule houses scattered about the land. The drowsy vale was still bathed in a thin mist that had formed in the cool night. Dew clung everywhere; on the sweet pine, the bitter scented oak trees, the new grass, the sleepy daffodils, the snowdrops and even the early bluebells; making the Royal Forest shine gloriously as if filled with diamonds in the light of the new day.

On the highest hill for miles around stood a huge old castle, surrounded by deep, dark icy water. Some said its moat held ancient fish-like creatures with the sharpest of teeth that would eat anything touching the surface within minutes. The grey castle had towers facing every wind direction, and each tower had numerous oval windows; they appeared small at first, but their sheer size became evident the closer one got. From

the castle, the small houses in the valley below appeared to constitute a reasonable sized town. One could even consider it a city, with its big flat grey stones carried down from the mountains to the east, which the people used as a pavement. The town, Satrea was founded many centuries ago, and its castle, Tarac, was one of the first buildings constructed for the first king.

In this almost crime-free land, the mysterious young Queen Artride of Ceartas now ruled. She was as much feared and hated for her deeds, as she was loved for her enchanting appearance.

The castle towering over Satrea functioned as a constant look-out for the people. Most were hardworking farmers and craftsmen; using the rich soil to grow their crops in the fields or their skills to make their living as had the many generations before them. Everyone in Satrea worked for the Royal Kingdom; but only the servants, guards and the knights lived in the castle and surrounding buildings.

This particular spring morning was cool, and everything was quiet apart from the occasional singing bird. The people and animals slowly awoke with the rising of the sun. Like the earth beneath them, refusing to part from the protection and safety of the night with all its hidden mysteries. It was a time in between. Between night and day; a time of passing, of a quiet waiting; a time of listening and learning. A time where great things could be accomplished.

The castle square was deserted, and everything in and around the castle silent. It seemed that nothing could disturb this serenity; not even the soft wind rustling through the dry leaves of the dying Royal Oak tree in the square. It almost sounded like a sigh or a whisper calling out someone's name; everything else seemed to hold its breath.

A sudden bang broke the silence; like thunder on a clear day. Only after a few skipped heartbeats did the sound appear familiar. It was the angry slamming of a wooden door; which had come from the courtyard.

A young woman was crossing the square taking big brisk steps. Dressed in the clothes of a knight, she was almost running. Her long, fair hair, almost golden in the light of the rising sun, danced across her back and shoulders with every step.

She wore tight fitting blue leggings with knee length black leather boots and a chain mail skirt, with a blue and white overcoat displaying purple shoulder pads. She was also wearing a soldier's girdle without its sword. Her hands were coiled in tight fists.

She was heading for the castle doors, and while maintaining her fast angry pace she muttered through gritted teeth, 'This time she has gone too far ... too far!'

The knight did not slow down as she approached the castle guards. The two men steadily watched her as she came towards them; then raised and crossed their spears before the massive oak doors to block her way. No one other than Royal families, their servants and some knights, had ever entered before without prior invitation.

She did not care whether the guards could see her rage or not. She couldn't care less about anything anymore after what she had learnt earlier that morning.

Coming to a halt in front of the two fully armed men, she glanced quickly at their emotionless faces. The left guard had a black moustache, a thin mouth and cold grey eyes like the castle walls. There was an unreadable expression beneath his helmeted head. The right guard merely looked impassive with his pale glazed-over blue eyes and big nose.

She had never really paid attention to the guards before, but she had assumed there were many of them, working shifts. Now, with this new morning, she had at last seemed to have woken; noticing things, actually seeing again after what seemed to have been a long time.

Knights had no reason to be in the castle, living in the outer buildings nearby; even if she was actually a commander and officially had to report the actions of her company to the queen or discuss situations with other commanders. Usually all meetings, which were very rare anyway, happened outside of the castle as was protocol, they were held mainly in the knights' quarters or out in the hills. And the trustworthy queen's messengers briefed her about new developments and relayed her demands back to the commanders.

She had therefore never met the queen in person; not many knights and commanders had in fact. Everyone knew she was avoiding contact and wild speculation was spreading because of this.

Only twice had she been inside the immense castle. The first was when she was knighted five years previously. The second and last time was about two years ago when she received a medal after a big conquest. It was at that moment the old king himself promoted her to commander. The two events in the castle seemed a blur to her now and she did not recall much of it, something she now regretted.

'Open the door ... please.' She tried not to sound upset or polite; just nonchalant, like those men. She had learned to contain her emotions over the years.

The one with the moustache replied sternly, 'Who is asking?'

She knew they had to ask this question, but she was annoyed all the same. She was after all a commander; who should be allowed to enter the

castle with permission. If the guards only cared to look at her shoulder pads.

‘Commander Tirsa Lathabris of the Seventh Company of *Ceartas*.’

Now she had their attention and they stared at her *and* her shoulder pads! The Moustache cleared his throat and asked again with a blank face, his eyes staring at her, ‘State your business, Commander?’

‘I have something to discuss with her.’

‘With whom?’ the other guard suddenly barked at her, alarmed. The guard, protecting the castle and the queen had more authority than a commander, therefore her rank made little difference.

‘With Artride of course!’ They were really getting on her nerves now.

‘That is *Queen* Artride, even to you!’

‘All right, Queen Artride. Now I am asking you this again; will you open the door for me? She is waiting,’ she added, lying.

‘She is waiting!’ The Moustache repeated incredulously, shaking his head while his companion stared at her.

It was obvious they didn’t take her seriously and if she hated anything about how people treated her it was just that. She was young, slim and appealing; not the usual commander type, but why would they question her intentions? Surely they knew her reputation? Perhaps that was the reason why they were questioning her.

The man on the right examined her face more closely. ‘So you are *the* Commander Lathabris; the one from the stories, the heroine?’ There had only been one female commander in the whole history of *Ceartas*; so there was really little doubt that it was her. However, she had kept to herself and had no idea what stories had been circulating roundabout her; not that she cared. Perhaps they had expected her to be different: taller or

more mannish or something? She had after all done what no one had ever done in the history of Ceartas.

‘I am here on official business!’ she added trying to contain her growing frustration about the time wasted talking.

The Moustache glared at her like she was some rare object. He said, ‘We’re sorry we did not recognize you.’ Tirsa had always refused permission to have her image painted, even though she was called by many a name, such as ‘The Snake’ and ‘Golden Angel’. Both guards noticed not only her fair beauty: her green shining eyes like jade, her straight nose and perfect mouth and skin, but also the unmistakable deep hidden fury within those eyes; a combination she was well known for. It had to be her.

‘I have not been around for a while; so perhaps I have become history already.’ Her lips tried to form a smile, but it was a sad smile and the two men felt a little uncomfortable.

‘Do you have an audience with her majesty, Commander?’ the Moustache asked a little more pleasantly, but in an aloof voice.

‘Yes!’

‘You are wasting your time, Commander. We know you haven’t. We are told this before we start our shift.’

Her face was set in lines of dissatisfaction. ‘What do you mean? I *have* to see the Queen today; it is a matter of life and death and I insist you open that door for me now ... or ... you’ll be in serious trouble!’ she added with such a furious fire in her eyes that both men became momentarily startled.

Her ominous tone did seem to have the desired effect; however, the guards quickly regained their composure. ‘That’s what they all say, Commander,’ the guard on the right answered. If it was a matter of life and

death, he surely would have heard about it. Guards were rapidly briefed about those matters by the messengers, never personally by a commander. Therefore it couldn't be as important as she claimed. It was probably a personal thing, the experienced Moustache figured. He had seen that kind of anger before with the folk of Ceartas during his night shifts at the castle gate, and afterwards he often heard it was about the penalties they did not agree with that had been imposed by the strict queen.

‘What?’

‘Sorry. You have to apply for an audience first. That’s the rule for everyone and you do know how it is with rules here,’ he added in a lighter tone, affected by Tirsa’s natural weight and charisma as a commander.

She did.

‘And how long will that take?’ she asked the Moustache, ignoring the other guard.

‘You can discuss it with the head of the Royal Guard. He keeps her agenda. If it is that important you should make contact with him.’

‘And where might he be?’

‘I am told he will be back on duty this afternoon.’

‘Who is replacing him at the moment?’

‘There is no need to.’

‘Yes there is! I want an audience right now!’ Her tone was becoming more threatening.

They ignored her.

She bit her lower lip and sighed, trying to come across friendlier, calmer. Holding her voice level she said, ‘Look. It is most important and I really do need to talk to her, so I insist on making an appointment.’

‘Understood, Commander. We will make a note,’ and the Moustache jerked a chin at the other guard to do so, which he did, quicker

then Tirsa expected.

‘You will hear from one of the messengers of the Royal Guard later on today regarding when and where you can apply for an audience to meet the queen.’

Later today? Tirsa practically exploded inside, but was trying desperately to remain calm. She was known for her hot temper when she was angry and could come across just as cold-blooded; hence her nickname, The Snake. And of course she was fast ...

Slowness when speed is needed is one of the many problems of this system!

‘So how do you decide what is urgent or not?’

The guards glared disdainfully at her and remained firm; shifting back into their straight positions, like statues as they were trained to do.

Protocol.

If she had just stressed that it was to do with the safety of the queen, she would have been in by now. She felt foolish for her lack of planning. She was never very good when it came to that. She was much too impulsive.

‘I see,’ she stated in a calm voice as she turned around. She knew she definitely could not wait until late afternoon or whatever time they had available for her. That would cost her more time than she could afford.

In a matter of seconds she turned her lithe body and caught the left guard full in the belly with a rapid and powerful side-kick. He immediately fell forward with a gasp; dropping his spear to the floor. Tirsa grabbed it and hit the other guard; who was too surprised to respond quickly, on the head. However, because he wore a thick bronze helmet it didn’t have much effect. He probably would have a headache later on, but he was still on his feet, pointing his spear dangerously towards her with

wide eyes, ready to strike. With her 'borrowed' spear she managed to knock his spear out of his hands and with a puzzled look he watched it drop to the floor. She then struck him hard with the spear on the back of his knees. When he fell to the ground she whacked him unconscious with the wood on his unprotected neck. *That did it!*

In the meanwhile the Moustache was trying to get up, so she had to wallop him on the neck with the spear as well; which proved to be very effective indeed.

'I am so sorry,' she said dryly. 'But, I'm sure you'll remember me now.'

She dropped the spear and quickly glanced around. Fortunately nobody had witnessed the commotion.

The two men lay on the floor in rather awkward positions, so she placed them both into sitting positions against each side of the castle door. It was quite a heavy task, but in a matter of moments she succeeded. It looked as if they were asleep; which probably did happen, because normally nothing really threatening occurred around here. Perhaps that was why they responded so slowly.

The real threat lives inside the castle! she thought grimly.

Tirsa breathed in deeply; she knew there was no turning back now. A serious penalty hung over her head if the queen found out. She might even lose her job, but she couldn't care less. *Oh yes, she will find out soon enough!*

Blind anger raged through her body like a furious flame as she thought about the merciless queen. She struggled to think clearly. With a lot of effort she lifted the heavy iron bar, which barricaded and held the massive doors shut. It slipped and fell with a loud metallic crash on the stone floor and she looked nervously around.

All was quiet in the courtyard. With all her strength she pushed against one of the doors and after a moment it slowly opened inwards and she hurriedly slipped inside, closing the door behind her with the same effort. She was in!

With a rapidly pounding heart, wide-open eyes and a dry mouth she stood with her back pressed motionless against the closed door.

She was in the Welcome Hall of Tarac; she could see dark high wooden chairs standing along the walls with red leather seats. It was calm in the huge hall with its green and blue carpets, oil paintings hanging from the walls, and highly embroidered tapestries which showed old scenes of crowds of people. In the middle was a perfectly round unlit fireplace surrounded by big grey round stones. It all looked very ancient and wealthy to Tirsia compared to her simple soldier's quarters.

The place was lit by the orange light of the rising sun shining through a large oval window to the left of her. In the air there was a scent like a mixture of cold stone and old wet wood. The smell of apathy.

At the end of the hall, close to the wall, she noticed a white marble winding staircase covered with the same green and blue carpet.

She swallowed hard and searched her mind for familiar sights. Where was the large Hall where she received her medal? She could see the hall ending in a corridor opposite her, which surely led to other rooms. The castle was truly huge; and now she knew why people could get lost in here. This hall in itself was already so grand!

She had to find the queen quickly and Tirsia didn't think she would be on the ground floor at this time of day. The kitchen would be here somewhere and the dining room with maids perhaps walking around preparing breakfast. She did hear a few muffled sounds coming from the far end of the corridor.

Artride would most likely be in her bedroom in one of the towers, her bathroom or dining chamber; perhaps in her library or ... in the dungeons watching the prisoners suffering. Queen Artride would love that according to the popular rumours she had heard about her. It was *she* who decided the fate of the condemned; it was a well known fact that she always had the last word in convictions.

Tirsa realized she had no idea where she could be, because she didn't know her habits at all, except from the bizarre stories she had heard. The companies were not really expected to know what the queen's habits were; only what she demanded and how her kingdom was supposed to be organized and ruled.

I bet she is in her personal quarters; wherever they may be. Tirsa glimpsed the winding staircase and in a few seconds she was ascending it.

If I meet anyone; I'll just say I have an audience. They should not suspect anything.

She tried to tread a little slower and behave naturally to avoid suspicion.

She came across the first floor and noticed many closed golden doors. A little voice inside told her: "Not here." So she went on to the next floor, and continued upwards until she was at the highest floor where the Towers had to be; everyone knew Royalty had their own guarded bedrooms. She peeked cautiously around and suddenly glanced into the grey, cold eyes of a mean looking old man.

Her heart leapt into her mouth and her breathing stalled; but then she realised how stupid she was to mistake a painted face for a real one. And a frightful face it was. She felt shivers running down her spine.

Adrenaline was rushing through her body; all the while she was deciding which direction she had to go, left or right. The walls curved in

both directions so she couldn't see what was round either corner. She noticed a few more doors. She decided to see where the left side would take her and tiptoed across the floor keeping close to the walls. The corridors were all dimly lit with torches here and there.

She almost saw the guard too late. Quickly she hid herself, pressing her body tightly to the wall. Instinctively she reached for her sword and stiffened to find it gone.

'Blast, forgot!' she cursed softly, but then remembered she couldn't use it anyway without seriously getting in trouble. She didn't want to harm her colleagues – as ignorant as they were.

However, she didn't have a plan; other than lying about having an appointment. She had no proof, so would they believe her?

They simply have to. She decided to go and face the guard.

Vehemently she walked over to the man, who straightened himself when he noticed her.

When she was only a few footsteps away, she recognized the guard. Quickly she searched her memory. It was Barkor; a former soldier from the company she started her career in. Tirsa remembered he had been wounded and had lost an eye in the same campaign that she distinguished herself in. As a soldier he was worthless; but as a guard, she guessed, he was good enough. He still looked big and strong.

She sighed relieved and relaxed. This could work in her favour.

He also calmed down visibly when he glanced at her, his mouth gaping open and the one eye staring wide and unbelieving at her.

'Tirsa? Is that you?' he sounded more than overwhelmed. She noticed a black eye rag in front of his missing left eye.

'Why, Barkor!'

‘Come here, little one!’ he laughed while he embraced her in a rough but friendly way.

‘You have come to pay me a visit?’

‘Er, not really, I had forgotten you worked here.’

‘That’s okay,’ his full lips formed a broad smile. ‘I’ve heard you’ve been pretty busy.’ He held her so he could look her in the eyes; she thought she saw a wave of pity combined with honest affection in his one dark eye.

‘Tirsa Lathabris, it’s been ages!’

‘So how’s life in Tarac for you?’ she asked quickly, and released herself from his too lengthy and tight embrace.

He looked shyly away scratching his head and messing up his neatly combed thick brown hair, answering in a stuttering voice, ‘Ah, the food is great and the luxury and all. I even get to see the queen sometimes.’ His hand reached for his heart and he sighed. ‘She is truly astonishing and she always nods at me kindly. But ... well, the work is a bit boring.’ And he added ruefully, shaking his head. ‘Not like the old days. Not by far ...’

She patted him on the back and smiled at him warmly. ‘But less dangerous, I reckon and that is for the better.’

‘Yeah, you’re right.’ He shivered when he thought about the worst part – the killing fields during war although somehow it made him feel more alive; to be close to death always did. He added proudly: ‘Hey, I even have quite some responsibility here. I am after all protecting the most important woman of the country. What more can a man in Ceartas want?’ He spread his arms and she saw he had gained some weight.

‘And a good job you do too.’

‘I should say so! Not a single person ever passed me without a fight! And I tell you, not even *you* would succeed, Tirsa!’ and he pointed a

finger at her with an amused eye.

She laughed somewhat nervously, and swallowed away her rising tension. 'But well, luckily for me I don't have to, for I have an audience with Her Majesty.'

His face showed interest. 'Ah, of course you do. With the queen herself?' She nodded.

'I can see and heard you are a commander now; well you really deserve it too. I bet you have something really important to discuss with her.'

'Yes, it is pretty serious actually.' And her face became grim. He knew she wouldn't tell him. He always had to drag things out of her in the old days and he guessed that hadn't changed; perhaps it even had become worse. The fact was she had changed for the better; but Barkor didn't know that. After she had left that first company to join and upgrade to her second, things had changed, but now it was gone again; the way a rainbow would come and suddenly dissolve into thin air. Barkor only knew the stories that spread among the soldiers; and was too embarrassed to ask her for the details now.

From underneath his leather overcoat he pulled out a small black book and began to leaf through it. His one eye shot from one side to another while he searched for her name on the thin pages with his thick fingers. Tirsa felt her heart in her throat pounding; this could be tricky.

'What time did you say, Tirsa?'

'An hour after sunrise.'

He still kept his eye on the book, distressed because he couldn't find it.

'She does have an appointment with a Commander Distoas from the Second Company, a little later, but –'

‘I am replacing him’, she interrupted Barkor quickly with a high pitched voice.

‘He’s got a nasty fever and this matter is very urgent and somebody had to go.’ Now he did look at her with his big watery eye. ‘In that case ... I’ve heard that the Second Company had a hard time with opponents at the border with Zoria, didn’t they?’

Fortunately she knew enough about that to answer the question. ‘Yes, five deaths on our side and about fifteen wounded.’ She sighed. ‘King Zoltas’ army doesn’t want to hear about peace. At that time I was in Razoras with my company, so we were too late for back-up, just like most companies were. The second one isn’t the best of them, like in our days. Now we have to try to work on that and we also have to talk about negotiations between Zoria and Ceartas again. I trust that Queen Artride will talk with Zoltas soon.’

‘I hope so. I don’t think Zoltas is the problem. At least his country has better honest laws, but he might want to expand his territory or perhaps some trouble between the two armies occurred? I have heard the lot of them are troublemakers. There should be some treaty, before it goes any further than this.’

Tirsa nodded. She hated the partial lie and hoped he wouldn’t be in any trouble afterwards.

‘Well, if it’s about justice, you know what to do.’ Barkor complimented her and patted her on the shoulders. ‘You were always the best when it came to that. That’s why I don’t have to wish you luck, because I know you can work things out with her; witty and clever as you are.’ He added whispering, ‘They say she isn’t too bad when it comes to peace treaties.’

Tirsa smiled. 'Thank you, Barkor.' And she meant it more than he could possibly know.

'Ehm, do I get to see you sometime, Tirsa, when you are free of course?'

Her thoughts were occupied with meeting the queen, so a little absent-mindedly she responded, 'Sure, we could have a drink together.'

His face lit up. 'Great, then we can share some memories for old time's sake.'

'I really have to go now,' she said.

'Yeah, you can't keep the queen waiting. It's the first door to your left. Just wait there. She is always on time and you still have some; or shall I tell her guard you are already here?'

'No!' she said a little too loudly and blushed when she saw the sudden distress on his face. 'I mean ... I'd rather wait. The last thing I want is to upset her by being too eager and early.'

'Very thoughtful of you,' he replied in a calm voice. 'See you later then.' and he took a step to the right, so she could pass him. She smiled at him and walked on towards her goal. She didn't have to look back to know that Barkor was still watching her until she disappeared round the corner.

So far so good. Quite handy to have friends in the castle. Now comes the hardest part; the personal guard shouldn't be too far away from the queen.

The walls were old and brown and normally Tirsa would have wondered what those walls might have seen throughout the centuries, if they had eyes, but not now, not today.

She came to a door with letters written on it. It read; Personal Meeting Chamber. She looked back to see if Barkor was still watching her, but he was out of her view. Hastily she went on.

There were no windows and the corridor was only poorly lit by torches placed on both walls. She noticed several other golden doors to her left and right, but ignored them.

At the end of the hallway she noticed two men standing rigid before a steep staircase. *The staircase towards the Tower of the Queen!* she heard herself saying in her mind and hoped she was right. It had to be; why would they stand there otherwise? The Tower itself was forbidden to every knight and commander, for it held the queen's bedroom and entry was only allowed when she asked for you.

This wing contained the queen's personal quarters. Behind the golden doors there was a music chamber, an arts chamber and even a library.

She almost froze where she stood.

Let's hope they are just as easy to persuade as Barkor. And she said a silent prayer.

Her eye caught a faded torch, which she quickly grabbed and hid behind her back. She stepped forward and the guard saw her looming figure coming. Immediately one of them shouted, 'Halt, who is approaching?'

'Commander Lathabris of the Seventh Company,' she responded professionally in a secure steady voice. They stood their ground while one held a flaming torch near to her face. She noticed them nodding at one another when they saw her shoulder pads. 'Commander ... who let you in? You do not have an audience.' These men also had an agenda in their head it seemed.

'I have come to replace Commander Distoas of the Second Company. He was unable to come.'

These two men were young and strongly built, and with clever faces, she noticed with dismay. One of them shook his head calmly with cold suspicious eyes. 'That appointment is cancelled. Yesterday we received a message that King Zoltas himself will come to speak with the queen in private.'

'Yes, and yesterday I personally told Commander Distoas his appointment was cancelled until further notice,' the other guard added. 'So, Commander, with all due respect, I don't understand what you are doing here.'

She felt herself turn crimson and tried to think quickly. 'Simply because one of the commanders has to accompany the meeting in cases like these. So I'm replacing him.'

His pale blue eyes got colder when he said, 'Miss, believe me, I know all the rules there are to know around here and unless we're told about this I have to deny you access.'

She knew when she was beaten and she tightened her grip on the torch.

They must have seen the panic in her eyes for one of them pointed to her arms, 'Hang on, show me your hands!' Just as he was about to grab her arm she thumped him hard in his face with her improvised weapon. He collapsed.

The other one drew his sword and said firmly, 'Drop that immediately and raise your arms above your head!' But she was faster again; she thrust into his stomach with all her weight knocking the sword out of his hand with her torch. It was enough to make him fall back against the wall. He stumbled and she caught him in the groin with her knee and struck the back of his head with her torch.. He passed out.

She had to catch her breath for a moment – she felt out of shape – before recovering and running up the small stairs towards the Tower Room. When she finally reached the emerald door she had a vision of the face of her little brother. It was for his life she imperilled her career and her life. *Justice will be done!*

Tirsa flung open the door, which surprisingly wasn't locked, and again realized in that moment she was acting foolishly. What was she thinking, without so much as knocking? But there was no chance she could face to wait any longer, or for no answer.

‘Where are you?’ she almost yelled, looking around the bedroom with a bewildered gaze.

The renowned Queen Artride was sitting directly opposite her, on a broad windowsill by a large opened oval window. She was a young woman, pale and veiled with long waving black hair like the night itself. She looked up from a letter she had been reading. There was no fright in her impressive midnight blue eyes; just calm curiosity when she saw the wild young knight with her green flashing eyes, like knives, staring defiantly directly into hers, holding her gaze steadily. No one normally dared. Tirsa froze on the spot and was struck instantly by the stunning beauty of the queen as they gazed at one another wordlessly. She felt the anger fade. Time itself seemed to have faded ... And then it continued; in a matter of seconds she saw a sudden change in the queen: fear, concern. She was stretching her hands out towards Tirsa as if to prevent something from happening behind ...opening her mouth ... It was too late for Tirsa to turn around and look behind her. Darkness closed over her mind like the dark manes of the queen.

CHAPTER 2

CONFESSIONS

*Death is not a punishment
for wrongdoing and life
not the reward for good.*

Tanith Lee

Muted angry voices sounded in the distance in her throbbing ears. ‘...to hit her! She was about to tell me something urgent and if you had not hit her unconscious I would have known what it was by now!’

‘But Your Highness, she knocked down four guards to get here and —’

‘Proof enough then that it must be important, Jaromir!’

Tirsa tried to listen to the two voices; one male and the other female, through her pounding headache, which wasn’t easy. It was as if the darkness pulled her back every time she tried. Somehow, she had to fight that, although it was tempting to just give in to it.

‘It might have been an attack on your life, Your Highness.’

‘One of my own commanders? My father – rest his soul – knighted everyone personally, are you saying you doubt his judgment?’

She heard Jaromir holding his breath ruefully. ‘No, of course not, Your Highness.’

A silence followed by footsteps coming her way. The woman’s voice sounded very close now. It was a pleasant vivid voice and warm despite her words. Tirsa wagered she was a good singer.

‘She does not have a sword on her and no other hidden weapons, I have checked that.’ *She had?*

‘I’ve heard she is very skilled in mortal combat,’ Jaromir started. ‘Obviously she must be mad for breaking into the castle like this; for surely she knows the consequences. Therefore caring little for her own life she must have come for yours. Clearly, she is an assassin. I advise you strongly to tie her up in case she wakes up.’ When she did not respond he continued, ‘My Lady, it is hard to trust anyone these days. Surely you must know that, even in our crime free country.’

‘I did not ask for your opinion, or your advice.’

Tirsa liked the way she responded to that annoying man. She had a feeling that the woman was examining her somehow; she thought she even felt a warm hand on her forehead briefly. It felt soothing. It brought her a little closer to the light again. She tasted blood in her mouth.

‘We have to do something about those guards; better training, better protection and most definitely a much better lock on the castle door, Your Highness,’ he raged while Tirsa heard him pacing the room back and forth.

‘If I cannot trust my own army anymore ...’ her voice sounded dubious and absent.

‘Times are changing. If your army is plotting against you, we will have to see to that. I start the investigation of course. We could arrange for spies and –’

She sighed. ‘We will discuss that later. I will query this one first, but ... I doubt she came to take my life.’ The anger she showed me when she came storming through that door I recognize all too well ... She came to ask for help; she came to ask for freedom. How could she explain that to her guard? ‘You are dismissed.’

‘But Your Highness, what if –’

‘That is all, Jaromir,’ she demanded without looking at him. She did not have to. He knew when to obey.

‘As you wish, my Lady.’

Tirsa heard hurrying feet, then a door opening and closing.

She could hear her sigh again more closely and the ruffling of a dress, and as the woman sat down, Tirsa felt herself moving to one side a little.

‘You can open your eyes now.’

Tirsa felt a little exposed as she did not really believe she could lift her heavy eyelids, even if she wanted to. When she tried; everything seemed a blur and the vague face before her eyes was bouncing up and down; as if she was on a ship on a stormy sea. It was not the first time she had been knocked out in her career, and she had been drunk a few times; which felt a little like this, without the pain. She could not seem to think at all. Tirsa shut her eyes again with a small moan.

‘It’s alright. I know you can hear me, just try it slowly. Try to focus your eyes on one thing first.’ Her voice sounded courteous and kind, and her warm hand seemed to give her new strength and energy through her forehead. It seemed to help to fight the pain.

Tirsa did as she was told; she focused on the eyes of the mysterious woman. It worked; her face no longer bounced before her; it even seemed familiar, but then again it was not a face you saw every day. It was unearthly divine; with those intelligent slightly slanted midnight ocean blue eyes; as if they understood all, and her scarlet wonderful mouth, which curled up in a faint smile. There was compassion in her face and something sad and wise at the same time. It was like looking into the face of love and life itself. Every worry seemed to slip away from Tirsa, like getting rid of an overweight chain mail after a long hard day. Feeling bare,

light and flowing, she continued to stare at that divine beauty without any thought, any worry. If she wanted she could lose herself completely, right now ...

Tirsa felt a tear slowly rolling down her cheek, which took her out of her dream state; as if that drop of soul water did not belong to her. All of a sudden she was feeling so much that she was weeping soundlessly. Weeping for the fact she had awakened finally; after months of living without seeing; without noticing things around her, without emotions, just doing her job in order to forget her pain and loss, avoiding any contact, any thoughts, and any feelings. Now she was not thinking either, only feeling; allowing herself to truly feel again, something she had blocked out for so long.

If she hadn't just moments ago heard that discussion before, she would have thought she was on the other side and this was a goddess. That wouldn't have surprised her at all. She didn't really lead a safe life, especially over the last couple of years; she had been quite careless.

At that exact moment she was aware of who she was again; and most of all where she was, and that this unearthly enchanting woman wasn't just any woman, but the Queen of Ceartas herself. Being Tirsa's country as well, she was therefore her queen. She quickly wiped away the tears with the back of her hand.

This was the first time she had seen Artride at such a close proximity. Too often, she was away on a mission for the land with her company to have cared for what she looked like; if she cared at all for Royalty; which she did not.

She forced herself to look around and discovered she was indeed lying in a bed; moreover the bed of Queen Artride! She had indeed found her bedroom. She had made it all the way, but not without casualty, and

touching her head she felt a wrapped bandage. A dull ache came from within her skull; at the back where she had been hit.

Slowly her thoughts came back and the veil was lifting. Again, she remembered the reason why she was here and she tried to sit up, opening her mouth to speak; but alas found no words when she looked upon that deceiving face again.

‘You were hit on the back of your head by one of my guards, wait,’ Artride said and she placed her hands on the spot. Tirsa could feel the pain subsiding. *How does she do that?*

‘There, that feels better, does it not?’

Tirsa wondered if she had bandaged her head as well. It didn’t seem possible, did it? A queen nursing a wounded knight!

She nodded and hastily clutched her head. Nodding hurt! Queen Artride smiled a warm comforting smile. ‘Try not to move your head too much, just lie down again and rest some more.’ It was impossible to disobey, and why would she want to?

Tirsa lay back on the warm soft sheets, feeling puzzled.

She seems so nice. But how can she be a nice person and responsible for so many deaths? That does not make sense at all!

‘I don’t reaaall –’, she tried with a thick tongue. It appeared she had bitten her tongue somewhere along the line. Her words did not make sense either.

‘Do not try to talk. We will converse later,’ she said, gesturing her to stay in the bed. Artride got up and whilst she was walking to the door, Tirsa observed her. The queen wore a long purple velvet dress with white laces and a dark blue girdle around her waist. There was something about her that just made you forget about everything else. As if she was the centre of everything; she certainly had that air about her.

I am bewitched! We all are.

‘No wait!’ she suddenly managed to say and she was surprised by the clarity and force of her own voice. The queen turned around and looked just as surprised at her.

‘Please.’ She added a bit awkwardly.

Queen Artride slowly walked back, and on her way she picked up a jug and poured some water in a glass, which she gave to Tirsa, settling herself on the bed again. Artride was curious enough to hear what she had to say.

She carefully took a few sips and quietly asked, ‘How long was I out?’

‘The whole morning; a couple of hours.’

Tirsa closed her eyes in distress. I might just as well have waited for that appointment after all! She cursed herself.

The Queen observed her calmly with a slightly tilted head, waiting patiently for her to talk. There were unmistakable signs of grief on her young face; Artride saw the same when she stared at her own reflection in the mirror.

Tirsa tried to avoid her penetrating, curious eyes. Instead, she looked at her own hands; fingers interlaced, lying in her lap.

‘I am sorry for bursting in like that. I ... didn’t know what else to do ... your Highness.’ Thank the heavens for remembering she was talking to a queen.

‘Well, I certainly hope you have a good reason for that error Commander. You do owe me a very cogent explanation. You could be fired for this and you should be aware that you will be punished.’ And she added more softly, ‘That is the law.’ And she turned her face away so she couldn’t see her eyes, as if she regretted this decision, but remained cool.

Tirsa met her eyes after a moment and felt weak. It was not that she was afraid of her own well-being, but thought again about her only concern now.

‘What was your reason to endanger yourself so?’

She swallowed hard and her voice quavered a little while she answered; looking at her hands again.

‘It’s my little brother, you see. You must have heard about him. Twelve he is. He probably came to pay me a visit when your guards imprisoned him and for what?’ She looked up and saw the queen opening her mouth slightly in shock.

‘Breaking a branch from an old dying tree! Because of your ancient laws, older than the tree, he will be hanged in three weeks time. Hanged!’ Her voice rose while she spoke and her face turned crimson from anger. She could feel a knot building up in her throat, as she tried to keep her eyes dry and head cool.

The queen tightened her face, dropping her head low and then glancing out of the window, ashamed, and as if she was waiting for some form of rescue.

For she knew perfectly well what Tirsa was talking about; although not realising it had been Tirsa’s brother. She sympathetically responded, facing her again, ‘Yes, it has come to my attention, naturally. I even talked to your brother. He did break off a dead branch indeed; not a live one,’ she ironically added, and rolled her eyes. ‘Unfortunately that tree was the Holy Oak on the castle square. The tree is dying, but still it’s not allowed for anyone except Royalty to even as much as touch it.’ She suddenly smiled sadly. ‘Heavy penalties are a result according to the Law Book. Your brother explained to me that he wanted to design a flute. He couldn’t have known he’d put himself in danger. However, according to the law; he

should have, for at the time he was in Ceartas where everyone is supposed to know the law, basically. And the penalties,' she added softly.

'But certainly you cannot expect a child to know the law! A child!' Tirsa forgot all about politeness regarding the queen for a moment. 'I am begging you to make an exception for children, please ...!'

Artride did not seem to mind her talking to her that way. She was upset herself. She was breathing heavily and her eyes were watery, avoiding Tirsa's.

'According to the book you reach adulthood at twelve in Ceartas, that counts for everyone, even visitors breaking a law,' she said solemnly. 'So we cannot consider him a child anymore; even if he is. You do not know how anything would gratify me more than doing something about changing the law, however ...' she lowered her face in shame, a strand of black hair covering her face.

'My Lady?' Tirsa asked questionably. The queen glanced again at the Commander of the seventh company and while she faced her with dignity she calmly shook her head, 'I cannot.' The words were out before she knew it. *Why I am telling her this? It will only cause her more grief.*

Tirsa shook her head in astonishment. She didn't care if it hurt. 'What do you mean, you cannot? You always have the last word in a penalty. Everyone knows that.' *That is why most despise you.*

'It is the law,' she repeated, unaffected.

'Then why don't you change it, if you dislike it so much?' she said defiantly with angry eyes. The queen raised one eyebrow at her remark.

'It is an absurd and old-fashioned law-system that we have here in Ceartas and I do not care if I am punished for saying that; for it's the truth. It never bothered me before; because maybe some things seem fair when it concerns criminals; they get what they deserve, right? Ceartas is a safe

haven because of that, but you must admit there were cases when people were sentenced, even to death without a trial like they have in neighbouring countries – without having their side of the story heard. How can you be sure they are guilty? And even if they have committed a minor crime; the penalties are ludicrous!’ She narrowed her eyes and continued in a icy tone:

‘I am told that you watch them die; without trying to do anything, is that not the case?’ her fiery eyes shot like arrows when she saw the queen’s startled look. ‘How can you? Innocent people! If the law allows you to sentence little children, then I say it’s about time you changed it!’

‘You are right, of course,’ the queen replied after a short silence, composing herself. She stared out of the window, expressionless.

Tirsa looked incredulously at her; she agreed with her? ‘Then why not do something about it? You are after all the queen!’

Artride gave a half smile, but it did not reach her eyes. ‘It doesn’t mean as much as you think. Indeed, I have prestige, riches, wealth, servants and power over the army and my people. Even some influence on keeping the peace and staying out of war. However; much as *that* may seem, I simply cannot change the country’s laws, no matter how much I want to. My title does not mean an awful lot when I cannot change, nor control the law.’

Tirsa suddenly threw away the blanket roughly, jumping off the bed. ‘I cannot listen to this rubbish anymore!’

‘I know it must be hard to comprehend, but please hear me out,’ the queen raised her voice.

Tirsa turned around defiantly. ‘Know? How can you possibly know what I am going through; I and all those poor relatives and friends of the condemned? Just listen to yourself one moment!’

Artride also stood up; with her cheeks red and her voice wrathful, 'Believe me, I try to do as much as I can for them, every time. Everything that lies within my power! You are not the first who comes to me begging to release their ... child, friend, sister, brother, lover; you name it! I try to sooth them, but that is all I can do and that ...' and she swallowed away her words with a sob.

Tirsa narrowed her eyes in disbelief at the words and the emotions of the queen.

'Is this your damn Law Book story you send them away with? This book, which drives so much terror into people's hearts, even into yours? Am I supposed to pity you now; is that it?'

'You have been listening to the stories very well,' she stated calmly in a subdued voice. Her face showed hurt and her blue eyes were not as bright and sparkling anymore, but glassy and distant.

'Perhaps it works for them. Gods, you almost had me fooled too!' Her lips twisted in scorn.

'But not me! I will not let this happen; we have done that for too long. I am no fool! It is time we made some changes around here!'

Tirsa had raised her trembling voice and when Artride saw her coiled fists and the anger in her eyes she thought: was Jaromir right, are they plotting against me? To throw me off my throne or worse? Well, if they are, maybe I deserve it. It is I who should be punished for letting this happen, not her, not her brother, nor all those people who died before him. Nevertheless ... I do not have to show her that! Then she heard a loud knock on the door and the voice of her bodyguard, Jaromir call, 'Everything alright in there, should I come in, Highness?'

'No, all is well, Jaromir; please resume guard at my door.'

Tirsa was standing by the open window now; staring out as the queen had done before and trying to hold back her hot tears; knowing it would be pointless to reason with the queen and that her case was lost, her shoulders shook a little.

Artride remembered what she had heard about Commander Lathabris of the Seventh Company. She had to admit to herself that she had not known much about her existence before this morning. Stories of the people seldom reached her ears; no matter how hard she tried to spy on them. Any gossiping was kept from her; probably for the best. People were too terrified to speak their minds for fear of being caught and punished. However, Tirsa seemed different from that, like she was fearless. Why?

While Tirsa was unconscious, the queen had learned from Barkor, who was proud to get the chance to talk to his queen finally, that her father King Macdin knighted the young woman about four years ago, before his sudden death. Barkor said she was ‘a good brave knight; both in battle and in peace; always defending the weak and the truth’. Two years ago, she had slain the brutal company leader of the Umbraris; a neighbouring country, in their last war. All Artride had known was that a young female commander had killed the man herself. Her father had rewarded Tirsa and back then, Artride was still a princess and occupied with her training. After that war was won, a peace treaty was raised, which had worked well ever since for both countries.

In a way, Tirsa was responsible for that, and a medal alone could not repay her. They made her commander; against her will it seemed, but she was not allowed to refuse the honour. According to Barkor and members of her own company, she was never proud of her title and she had a major breakdown. Fortunately for the sad young woman there wasn’t much to battle; for peace ruled the land. There were also rumours that she

had lost a lover in that last war and completely collapsed because of that, before she could continue her work. Barkor said she had not been the same after; she became very quiet and absent-minded. Nothing really mattered to her anymore and she periled herself a lot, just as she had done now. Like she embraced death more than life.

So young and already a leader of people; in a way against her will, what a life and responsibility! Then Artride suddenly realized that she herself was exactly that; only a few years older she guessed. We have more in common than we both realize.

She walked over to the young woman and knew she could not take away the pain, let alone ease her. Once again, she had to admit she failed as a queen and even as a person.

I have to tell her the complete truth; about the secret ... only then will she be able to understand.

‘Tirsa,’ and Artride raised her hands to touch her shaking shoulders, but there was so much anger and grief radiating from her, that she couldn’t. Her voice became formal and stern,

‘Commander Tirsa Lathabris, do sit down and listen.’

She heard her inhaling quickly. ‘How come you know my name?’

‘I would be an even worse queen, if I did not know who you are.’

However, I did not at first, so that says more than enough.

Tirsa sank down in a chair, next to the desk by the window. She had a spectacular view of the wooded hills and she stared into the distance. It seemed ages since she had dwelled in the woods and mountains carelessly. She found herself longing for those days, in which everything seemed so much simpler. Now she was stuck in this and she would act. Perhaps in order to get those carefree days back, somehow, but she knew that was just

a wishful dream; impossible, for with all her bad memories she would never ever be carefree and happy again.

‘I will only listen if you release my brother; and I won’t listen at all if this is going to be a soothing talk about the ‘holy’ Law Book; for I am not having any of it!’

Artride admired her strong attitude and character, and found it difficult to be strict with her.

‘You will listen, even if I have to tie you up and put a muzzle on you!’ she replied loudly and it had the effect she hoped for. Tirsa looked up and closed her half-opened mouth. Artride’s face became like a rock. She was a professional and would not lose herself again. Somehow, she regretted this, but she had no choice. She perched down on another chair opposite Tirsa and arranged her long purple gown with her delicate fingers.

‘Now, it is a rather long story,’ Artride began, facing her. ‘And I will try to tell it as briefly as possible.’ Tirsa had the impression she weighed her words like a pair of scales.

‘You were right when you said it had to do with the Law Book of Ceartas. This time I will tell you the absolute truth; for I believe you of all people deserve it. Not everyone is ready for its facts, you see; and it would not be possible to tell just anyone safely anyway, even if I wanted to and believe me I want to.’ She sighed deeply while a terrible hurt contorted her face. It was not easy telling this and she felt confused, being on unknown territory. ‘I will clarify myself: you are a soldier of higher rank, a commander of my order so it is safe when I tell you this.’ She looked around gracefully and with weight when saying this, as if another pair of ears was listening.

Safe? Why then does she look so afraid?

Tirsa was getting curious and she had the feeling that whatever the queen was about to tell her, it was a heavy thing, a burden and perhaps she was even glad to get it off her chest.

‘The book,’ Artride began. ‘Is ... cursed.’

Cursed? Tirsa thought.

Artride continued nervously, ‘Many generations ago, the ruling king, King Oleva the Great, my great-great-something grandfather wrote down the laws and punishments in a Law Book as was common to gain order and a sense of control in a time when it was very much needed. It was not even a bad idea really. However, his counsellor and sorcerer, a very powerful one, laid a spell on it to give it the absolute power needed. He did this to have full control and with that, keep Ceartas free from chaos, violence and destruction for always ... There were an immense number of crimes in those days and chaos ruled. Kings had little influence on that; even wealthy ones and only then with violence. However, a powerful sceptre was magic; for magic was still practiced in these parts by old descendents and pupils of the Silent Folk. From the moment the secret spell was born, the law simply had to be followed – *had* to – as well as the punishments. No trials, no pleas, no nothing other than the penalty. There was no escape from that, ever, other than death itself; sometimes worse than the penalty if not obeyed. To some it seemed fair; after all, when you committed a crime the common moral was, like today, consequences, and you had to pay for a crime somehow in order to understand the wrongdoing, and as an example to others. The minor punishments were not so terrible – paying fees and delivering ranks. Guards saw to it that those penalties were being carried out to avoid any ... pain.

‘After all people knew about the strict laws and even discovered that there had to be powerful old magic involved; for there was no escape

as I mentioned before, not ever from the invisible but all-watching eyes and ears of the Law book. It became a Holy Book for the people: worshipped and praised, as was its founder, the king. The sorcerer never got the credit, though. The king kind of forgot about him when his own status seemed to rise again.’ She locked onto Tirsa’s green eyes and saw her mouth hanging slightly open. She was stunned; that much was obvious.

‘Over time ... people moved to other countries; others stayed, because of its safe life. You see, the Law Book is the foundation, the very essence that keeps Ceartas such a safe haven. Unto this day no one can be attacked (other than in war), have their things stolen, be murdered or cheated on, and *not* be justified. Justice ...’ she said at length and took a deep breath, shaking her head before she continued.

‘Justice as the people saw fit in *those* days. But as you put it yourself; the system was not safe and many people with innocent intentions, such as accidentally killing someone in self-defence or breaking a minor law by accident or ignorance, like your brother, suffered penalties, even lost limbs and worse – their lives.’

Tirsa thought about the cruel punishments she heard about for serious crimes; amputation of a hand after stealing, beheading for murder, hanging for violating Royal beings, banishment for betrayal, but mainly paying fees for numerous things. The wealthy could pay off most of these crimes by paying large sums of money, for that was allowed. The king of those days must have been very rich, as would Artride be, Tirsa reckoned.

‘And it still exists!’ Tirsa opened her mouth in sudden shock, her eyes raged. ‘How can it be possible? Why didn’t the Royal Family change the law?’

‘King Oleval wanted to change a law once after many years, and tried to write in the book, erasing one law and writing a new one. Times

change, people and their ethics, norms and values change, countries change and laws and penalties should change with it. We have become civilized people; we are not the brutes of old times anymore that walked around raping women, plundering villages and murdering innocent people.

‘But as I was saying, the old king discovered he could not write in the book; his pen broke time after time upon touching the parchment. Altering laws was impossible. What once started as a powerful spell became in fact an everlasting curse. For you see, the sorcerer in the ruling years of the king felt betrayed when he forgot all about him; bathing in his new wealth and glory. All he wanted was at least some credit, some honour, some name made for himself. Then one day, having had access to the special chamber where the book lay, he added a new spell to the existing one. From that day on, no soul would ever be able to add, remove or change any laws and penalties written within it, nor... destroy it. It was cursed from that moment on, leaving the king and his future offspring powerless. So with all its might, still no one even in these days, many centuries on, can write new rules in the book. Not even Royalty ... not even me.’

‘What ... what happens if you release someone convicted?’ Tirsa said with an overwhelmed expression.

‘There is *no* escape.’ Artride bent a little forward in conspiracy. ‘If the lawbreaker is not caught for a crime; if my men do not get him, the curse of the book will punish him more painfully and terrifyingly than my men. That is a fact and one I always try to avoid, as you will understand.’

You think hanging isn't painful? Tirsa thought about her brother.

‘I have seen it happen to a thief once; that converted me alright.’ She spoke in thought as if she had actually heard Tirsa speak out her

words. Her father had made her watch in terror when she did not believe him at first.

‘The victim is inflamed from within by a terrible fire tearing at all his nerves; growing more painful by the minute, but not killing him. It would, however, if we had not ‘rescued’ him and arrested him to free him from pain and exhaustion and given him his original punishment: amputation of one hand.’ The heart can only take so much pain before it collapses.’

Tirsa was silent in puzzlement.

‘Fortunately for most people, witnesses report crimes and some criminals even turn themselves in. Especially after the torment they experience, as they suspect magic to be involved and know the many stories about the unavoidable punishments. They are tormented by these terrible pains until they report them; after they do that, the sooner it is all over; if they do not commit suicide or are taken by the curse that is.’ The number of suicides was, compared to other countries, higher in Ceartas; Tirsa only now completely understood why. However; the crime rate was very low. As far as the people knew; for by looking at it that way a lot of crimes were resolved if people killed themselves.

‘But why doesn’t anyone know about this curse; so people can be warned to begin with to avoid any crimes. Wouldn’t that have been a better spell in the first place? What a daft sorcerer and king!’

‘I agree, whatever the reason for secrecy is we’ve never found out. It seems to me very foolish indeed. If everyone knew, truly knew, there would be no crimes at all, now would there? Maybe that was just the intention of the sorcerer in some wicked way, his final spell – the curse; not only were rules not to be changed, no one was to know either about any of this. Otherwise: instant death. I think it had to do with power and vanity.

But well, today, apart from the fact that most people respect the power of the book already and try to avoid breaking any of its laws, suspecting its power, we indeed have less crimes than other countries. Only members of the Royal Family and servants may actually *know*. This being a rule as written in the book; if other people find out literally, the curse exterminates them instantly. It happened before. My father told me, warned me. For you it is safe to know though, but you understand what I ask of you?’

‘Secrecy.’

Slowly she nodded. ‘Bluntly put, if my people find out, Commander, Ceartas will soon be without inhabitants. The sorcerer may have not cared about that, but I certainly do.’

That is one successful way to reduce a population or end a war even! Tirsa painfully stared at her and her temper flared from comprehension to disbelief. It was all so bizarre and the queen so frightfully honest; she had no other choice than to believe her. She frowned and little wrinkles appeared between her dark brows.

‘Now perhaps you can begin to understand how powerless I truly am. My rank does not mean anything, King Oleva the Great, or rather his counselling sorcerer,’ she said cynically, ‘made sure of that.’

Tirsa thought about how odd it had seemed to her when she heard about the strange disappearances of people and that when a crime was committed justice was *always* done. It just seemed like a mystery, but then again, she always had a soft spot for those and never really wanted to find the underlying cause of it. Sometimes things were better left alone; especially things you couldn’t really change, the innocent things on the mystical side; this however wasn’t so innocent she now knew, how ignorant of her! She was always too busy to pay it much attention and no

one ever could tell her a sane thing anyway. One thing she did know: gossips and true stories were hard to separate and it was often no use, as not many people knew the difference or cared for the real truth. Sometimes made up tales were more fun and left more space for imagination. Now she knew the truth of it, she would not let it go.

She ran a hand through her wild blonde hair, felt the head bandage and was a little ashamed for the way she looked. She had not even glanced in a mirror this morning. Tirsa looked down at her clothes and noticed she was not even wearing her complete outfit. However, it did not seem to bother the queen at all.

‘Curses can be broken,’ Tirsa promptly said. ‘I have heard about that fro—’ quickly she closed her mouth, for she had almost told the queen about her friends the Woodchildren, that knew old magic. She added more softly, ‘It’s a magic spell so there must be a way to break it, even if it seems unbreakable.’

Artride stood up. She was too tense to sit; instead, she paced around the room.

‘I agree; but my father and I have tried everything to disable it; burning, ripping every page out, burying it in the deepest holes and widest seas; every thought imaginable; but nothing worked. Every time it is simply back unharmed in its own locked room in the castle. She pointed out, gesturing with her hands, ‘The only sorcerer who could have helped me; tell me if there is a way to break it, a counter spell, anything, is the one who put it there in the first place and he is long dead. So I am on my own. We are dealing with High Magic here and I believe the only way to defeat it is *with* magic. Fire with fire, so to speak.’

‘Yes, there must be wizards who could work out a spell against it or at least advise you how to break it,’ Tirsa agreed.

The queen walked in circles around her, in order to think, but it made Tirsa's head toll.

'I have traced down every known wizard and sorcerer. However, being unable to tell them, without them dropping dead on the scene, it was most difficult, because of course I had to show them the book eventually, after warning them to protect themselves with every spell known to them. Most had a hard time fighting the curse, and some died,' she announced sadly.

'When only seeing the book?' *It is that powerful?* Tirsa swallowed hard.

'I have tried many ways to have them make a spell which could remove the curse; without exactly telling or showing them the kind of curse, but that was of no use.' She rolled her eyes upwards in an appealing way.

'Every bit of information or insinuation I made was already telling and therefore lethal.'

'Couldn't they guess, I mean knowing our country and its history?' *I probably should have known too.*

There was a moment of silence. It was very quiet in the Tower Room and Tirsa noticed completely how very much aware of the presence of the appealing queen she was; whom she began to respect more now she knew the complete story. Artride was not such a mystery to her anymore and she imagined many people would want to change boots with Tirsa.

Well, not exactly right now, I presume. Thinking about her brother.

'I wish I had warned my brother of the law system of Ceartas in greater detail than I did. I remember I did tell him about the Holy Oak tree though; its importance to the Royal Family. I assumed he understood the consequences when violating the tree.'

‘Well, he is still a child.’

‘I didn’t even know about a death penalty relating to that tree!’
Tirsa remarked upset.

I have been away too long.

Suddenly she felt the hand of Artride on one of her shoulders. She almost jumped, but then relaxed. It was comforting; however, it was also a gesture of shared sadness and defeat.

Tirsa got up as if to escape her touch.

‘I can’t let him die,’ she said furiously; gritting her teeth against the pain as she saw past memories of the ones she’d lost without being able to do anything. *Everyone dies on me!*

‘Not this time,’ she murmured to herself, coiling her hands into fists.

‘It does not make any difference whether you know the truth or not,’ Artride spoke more to herself than to Tirsa. ‘It will not change much, not for you, not for me. All those people must despise me for it and I do not blame them. How can they respect me when they do not know what is happening? If anyone cared, that is. They all have their opinions ready. They fear me, I see it in their eyes; they fear me and there is no greater enemy than fear.’

The two women exchanged a quick look and both recognised a sense of self pity, which was just as numbing and destroying.

‘I care, my Lady,’ Tirsa silently admitted; fathoming her feeling of being powerless and being feared.

‘I believe it must be harsh, to obey the cursed book, its laws, and not being able to tell the truth and not being the queen you want to be. Now that I know, at least I can try to begin to understand if it helps. Thank you and sorry ... sorry for being so inconsiderate to you before.’

They stared longer into each other's eyes. She was touched. Finally Artride had found her match; someone who was not afraid of her and didn't adore her simply because she was the queen. She was honest and spoke her mind, which might even equal hers.

She smiled at the young woman, who felt warmed all over by it. Nobody could see her smile and not smile back. Tirsa saw her eyes suddenly fixed on something and followed her gaze. It appeared she was looking at the letter she was reading when Tirsa broke in her room. Artride had dropped it on the floor and thought nothing about it since. She bent over and picked it up.

'I have not given up all hope, Commander.' That got her attention and in anticipation she waited for her to continue. 'On his death bed I promised my father that I would find a solution for this misery. There seems to be some spark of light in the darkness.'

'There is hope?'

The queen sat down again and explained, 'I have heard about a sorceress; a very mighty one. She is suppose to live in a nearby country; Dochas –'

'The Magical Land?'

The queen looked in surprise at her. 'Why yes, it is said that she might be able to break any spell and I assume curses as well. I know it is hard to believe, but I tend to grab any opportunity there is.' Her eyes shone full of life again.

'It does sound hopeful. But where did you obtain this information?'

'It is somewhat unclear to be honest. The one who told it to me in confidence; an old woman, almost blind and deaf and a little scatty, travelled to Dochas in her younger days. According to her this sorceress

must still be alive today. She says she still feels her presence. I know that I shouldn't trust her that easily, nevertheless it's all I've got!

'As far as I know nobody has ever come back alive from The Magical Land,' Tirsa said shaking her head. 'But who knows, there might be some truth in what she says. The Magical Land is the only place where it could just be possible to find someone strong enough to break the curse!'

'This old woman only made it just over the border when she was forced to go back. The work of the sorceress, she claims. She met the local Silent Folk, who told her about the powerful sorceress. It seemed that she held Dochas, an old name for the country, in some sort of magical spell. Even the Silent Folk could not break it; so this person, human or not, must be very powerful indeed. If she is still alive; good or evil natured, who knows what she can do for us. It does not hurt to try.'

'This is the most information I've ever heard about Dochas!' Tirsa said incredulously. 'I've never met anyone who could tell as much as this.'

'I trust you always wanted to go to Dochas?' Artride smiled at her.

'Now more than ever. I'm not afraid.'

I think the only fear you have is losing the ones you love; your only fear, Artride thought, but said, 'We know so little about that country that it would also be a unique opportunity to explore it for ourselves.'

'It would indeed.'

Artride's smile faded. Tirsa cleared her throat and straightened her back while she stood up daintily, 'With your permission I will lead my company into Dochas for a complete investigation and search for the sorceress. She will have to help you. No one can refuse a company of the queen carrying an order from you; not even a sorceress. I will bring her to you.'

Queen Artride was touched by the offer, but looked concerned. ‘That is very noble of you, Commander Tirsa, but I cannot possible endanger an entire company. I have heard it is the best we have; surely because of you. It would attract too much attention. The sorceress must not feel threatened or alarmed by a full armed company. I’ve known some magicians who do not appreciate large companies at all. No, we must not risk this. I will go alone.’

‘What? And threaten *your* life, my Lady?’

‘You sound like Jaromir!’ She gave out a quick laugh. ‘Do not worry; my best bodyguard will accompany me to protect me; because a country without its queen – we do not want to do that to the people do we?’ she laughed cynically.

‘Besides, even if I wanted to go alone, I am not allowed to according to the Law Book. There are rules for me as well. When this sorcerer cursed the book he cursed the king and his future offspring.’

A little disappointed Tirsa stared at her boots.

Artride glimpsed at the door. She knew no one could hear voices when inside the bedroom, however she kept her voice down and said, ‘I do not really trust any of my guards. They are all here for themselves and their selfish pride. I know they will risk their lives for me, but well ... it will be a long journey and to be around the head of my guards and the others every hour of the day ... it will drive me insane before we’ve even reached Dochas!’

Tirsa found herself sniggering and immediately suppressed it; for how could she laugh while her brother was in danger?

‘I would rather have a bodyguard with a clear head; someone to trust; who is strong and brave enough to face the perils as we journey; someone who wants Ceartas free just as much as I do; not for honour,

himself, or me, but for the benefit of the common good; the country, the people and their freedom ...’ Tirsa’s eyes widened while the queen spoke. ‘Someone like ...’ and she stared longingly at the other woman, but then blinked her eyes and caressed the side of the wooden chair with her delicate hands as though the furniture was an animal. For a moment she looked mournful and vulnerable; not like the self-assured queen Tirsa had thought all along she was.

‘Someone like me?’ she carefully tried.

‘No, Commander, I mean yes but –’ Her eyes sparkled again. ‘I cannot possibly ask –’

‘I have no choice, Your Highness; I have to, for the sake of my brother, and I would be most honoured to help you try to get rid of that damn curse.’ She clutched her head firmly, which had started to throb heavily. For a terrifying moment she thought it was the book taking revenge for offending it. However, Artride knew better.

‘Sit down and let me help you.’ Tirsa felt her warm hands at her head and the pain reducing again.

‘You know magic as well?’

‘Some; only healing.’

‘That is still more than most of us.’

‘Anyone can do this with training. Not enough to heal the wound completely though. You have to sleep and let your body do the rest.’

Sleep, in a time like this?

‘My Lady, I am perfect for the job.’

She bit her lower lip again; it seemed like a habit to Tirsa, who found it appealing.

‘Tirsa, it is yours.’ The queen smiled wearily at her.

‘Good. I reckon I won’t get punished now?’ and suddenly her face flushed while she thought about the Law Book and what she had just heard. ‘Hmm ...what about my punishment; what does the book say about these breaches?’

‘A commander is never punished severely. I do not know why; perhaps the king had loyal commanders and he never thought about them breaking any law.’ And she gave Tirsa a half smile with one raised eyebrow in conspiracy. ‘It is a crime of course for any member of the army to knock down colleagues, lie about having an audience, break into the castle and enter my room, my bedroom even, without permission.’ Tirsa turned crimson at that and tried to avoid the queen’s eyes.

‘That is four crimes in one; however, I have looked it up and it is stated that the only punishment is up to the king or queen. It surprised me. I get to decide for once,’ she said when she saw the relieved face of the commander.

Artride got up, walked to the desk while Tirsa watched her curiously with an increased heartbeat. *What will my punishment be?*

Suddenly she was handing her a piece of paper and a pen.

‘Write a letter to your brother. Remember not to say a word about the true goal of your mission and about the book of course; just that you will try to help him.’

‘That’s my punishment?’

Artride giggled. ‘No, silly, excuse me – commander – you are going with me; *that’s* your punishment. I just want you to comfort him.’

Tirsa nodded gratefully, pulled her chair towards the desk, and started writing.

After a few minutes, she looked up at the queen who was staring out of the window.

‘How long will we be gone? If we leave tomorrow it will be a day’s ride to the border, but we have to search for this sorceress in an unfamiliar country. And we have to be back within three weeks; not an easy task.’

The queen answered without looking at her, ‘If all goes as planned it will take about two weeks I think, perhaps slightly longer; we will have to do everything possible to make it in time.’

‘But there is no plan, is there? We don’t know anything about where this sorceress lives or how long it will take us really.’

‘True, the only plan is to leave tomorrow and hopefully arrive at the border the day after, and then the search begins ...’

‘No curse, no hanging.’ Tirsa managed to say, but not without a lump in her throat.

‘Do not mention his punishment. He still does not know what will happen. I would like to keep it that way.’

‘He doesn’t know?’ and Tirsa nodded grimly. ‘Well, the better for him. Can I not see him?’

‘I am sorry, that is not allowed unless you want to feel yourself burn inside which I would strongly suggest against for your brother’s sake too; it is awful to watch. That is why I want you to write the letter. I will give it personally if you trust me.’

Tirsa stood and folded the letter neatly, handing it over to the queen.

‘I do.’

‘I promise I will destroy it after he has read it. No one may even suspect our mission.’

‘No one, not even your guards? Are you that afraid of the curse? Will it also kill the person who tries to break it?’

‘No, I would be dead by now. It has to be a secret mission to be on the safe side,’ she said thoughtfully.

Although it made sense to Tirsa she did have the feeling that Artride had not told her the whole story yet. Why should she trust *her* more than her own guard? She had not exactly lived up to earn that trust yet, but she gathered the queen need not to fear because of Tirsa’s own personal quest. *Besides ... maybe she had not chosen her guard herself.*

‘Alright,’ she said while standing up. ‘I’m going to prepare myself for the journey, and I have to name a replacing commander for the time being. If you will excuse me, Your Highness.’

‘Of course, Commander. I trust that together we will make an excellent team. Please have your horse packed and meet me at the square at first light tomorrow morning.’

Tirsa nodded and walked towards the door, but before she reached it she turned and asked, ‘What will you tell the Ceartasians about your absence?’

Artride raised her shoulders nonchalantly, ‘I shall make up a plausible story. I am good at that, you know. I have learned to lie quite a lot in the last year.’ She smiled in conspiracy at her. Tirsa smiled back at her and bowed. ‘It was an honour meeting you, your Highness, truly, and thank you ... for this,’ and she pointed at her head.

‘That’s alright. Just remember to get enough rest.’ Tirsa pressed her lips tight in answer.

‘If you have any questions please, do not hesitate to ask. From now on, you will have my permission to enter the castle freely. You are my personal bodyguard. The others will know and believe it is your punishment for breaking in; though they might think it odd, ignore them.’

Questions? I have dozens! Reluctantly she responded, ‘Thank you, my Lady.’

‘Oh Commander?’

She turned around and stared at the queen questionably.

‘Next time ... just *knock* on my door, will you?’

Tirsa flushed a little. Artride returned her shy smile warmly.

‘Goodbye, Commander.’

She opened the door for her and let her out. Jaromir immediately faced the two of them. He was a big muscled bald man. ‘Your Highness?’ At least now Tirsa saw the face belonging to the voice. It was an icy serious face with no expression other than mistrust. His head was shiny like a wet egg.

‘Guide Commander Lathabris to the outside doors with respect please.’

‘Yes, Your Highness,’ he replied courteously. The two of them walked through the corridor while Artride followed them with her gaze.

Inside her room, she picked her coat from the hook on the wall and put it on, placing the letter in its inner pocket and opening the door again. Another guard clicked his boots and lowered his eyes with respect. She turned to him saying, ‘If anyone needs me, I will be in the dungeons.’

CHAPTER 3

PAST PRESENT

*Many ways north and many south,
Many east and many west,
And all ways leading to the centre,
But only one to reach the heart.*

Celtic proverb

The chiming of Tarac's bell woke everyone in the castle and the city that morning.

It only rang when something significant was happening or about to happen. In either case, everyone had to gather on the large courtyard of Satrea.

The monotonous low sound was heard in the entire valley and at least a mile beyond when the wind was right. It also woke Elimar, not that he had slept much that night.

He got up from his hard wooden bed and hurried over to the iron bars, firmly attached to the only window of his little dark prison cell. He was lucky for it was the only cell with a window; even if he had to stand on his toes to grab at the bars, pulling himself up to be able to get a glimpse of the outside world. The only thing he could actually see was at street level and the many passing feet, mainly from soldiers. He felt a cold gust of wind blowing along his young face as he said his prayer hopefully, 'I am counting on you Sis,' before he had to let go and let himself drop to the floor.

~ ~ ~

In Satrea, a messenger was reading aloud to the curious inhabitants a speech Queen Artride had written the night before: ‘Today,’ the stocky man on the horse started in a low, loud voice, ‘our Queen Artride of Ceartas; daughter of the late King Macdin of Ceartas, will travel abroad in order to find herself a suitable husband.’ The opening sentence was a little muffled by the astonished outburst of the people. He waited until the crowd had calmed down a little. Slightly louder he continued, ‘She will be accompanied on this journey by the Commander of the Seventh Company, Tirsia Lathabris, who will act as the queen’s bodyguard. The castle and city will be well protected by the army in her absence, should any disturbance occur. The Head of Guard Jaromir Satrea will be your supervising supplant in the meantime to ensure that the Law is obeyed and the army will conform to him. The queen hopes to be back before the next moon. She would like to ask for your understanding and kind support.’

He folded the parchment and said, ‘Queen Artride will leave in half an hour. If you want to bless her leaving, please come to the castle square. She bids you all farewell.’

The people were noisy and talked loudly in excitement with one another, some already heading towards Tarac in the shimmering morning glow.

Most did not know whether to be pleased or worried; for change could make it even worse. What if she found a cruel unfair husband? At least now they always knew what to expect; for Artride was known for following the Law Book literally and strictly, fierce but fair. But people were glad she was making as much effort as this, for she had never seemed to do so before. People liked weddings, especially Royal weddings and it would give them something to talk about and to look forward to. The queen had previously rejected many offers from wealthy men, even Royal

princes and kings from neighbouring countries. Perhaps, they wondered, she wanted a simple man; not wealthy, but more down to earth?

All the people could do was guess. This news was more than they could hope for. It offered them some more insight into the world of their mysterious queen. Naturally, she wanted to choose herself; that made sense.

The massive oak gate opened for Satrea's people, and in a short time the large round courtyard had filled with a noisy crowd waiting in anticipation for the queen to appear.

In the quiet stables off the courtyard, Tirsa was packing her stocky amber mare for the journey. She had filled the saddlebags with all the things that would be useful and had balanced the weight evenly; all her weapons including her single-handed sword, her longbow and arrows. She had also packed dried and fresh food, a first aid kit and a leather water pouch. Behind her saddle, she had a rolled up woollen blanket.

She was wearing her complete costume now; the heavy mail skirt, which protected her torso and abdomen, the colourful green overcoat and a chain mail coif; she was wearing down now, showing her single blonde ponytail which she wore high on the back of her head. She also had an iron helmet stored away in her bags but within easy reach; however, she would only use it if absolutely necessary as she didn't really like it. It was heavy and uncomfortable and hindered her senses. The outfit which was unisex, did not hide her feminine features though, and her strong long legs covered in midnight blue, and knee high black boots.

'Are you ready, Fiosa?' she asked her horse friend whilst stroking her nose. The mount simply stared at her with nervous eyes, ears pinned backwards, listening. 'I told you; we are not going to battle, so don't fret.'

Together they had witnessed a fair amount of violence; and normally when they went for a pleasure ride, Tirsa wouldn't pack her so heavily, so the horse wasn't nervous without reason.

She led her outside towards the inner square, but before she reached it she saw a young woman walking over to her. It was a servant, she noticed, looking at the formal apron the kitchen staff wore.

‘Commander Lathabris?’

‘Yes?’

The young woman quickly pushed a large-sized paper wrapped package in her hands; it felt warm.

‘What's this?’

‘Extra food; you never know when you might need it. Make sure the queen gets it, she doesn't eat that much lately.’

Small wonder. Tirsa peeked at the package. ‘That is very thoughtful of you. From whom should I say it is?’ However, when she glanced up the girl was already walking away rather quickly.

‘At least tell me your name!’ The girl halted and turned around, her two loose brown braids swung around her shoulders. ‘Oh, she knows. Just take good care!’ she shouted and disappeared around the corner.

She wondered why, if she seemed to know the queen personally, had she not given it to her herself or made sure it was packed in her saddle pack? No matter; Tirsa would hand it over to her all the same. Absent-mindedly she stuffed it away in her saddlebag.

At the inner square, a large crowd had gathered; soldiers, guards, cooks, maids and other servants. These were all the people who lived in Tarac, and within its gates.

When they noticed her, the crowd began to clap their hands for her. Tirsa flushed a little, even if it wasn't the first time this had happened; she

would never get used to the admiration, fame brought. She also felt ill at ease in crowds.

Tirsa also recognised some of the men and women; especially the soldiers from her own company, who were all there. She also spotted some soldiers from other companies who happened to be there.

Yesterday she had named her under-commander as replacing commander during her absence; a good friend and soldier with more years experience than her. He had always envied her and everyone knew that had she not received her medal and title two years ago, he would have been commander of their company by now. However, he never resented her for that openly. She nodded at him when she noticed him among the crowd.

The majority were looking at her with respect; however, some did so with envy. They had all heard who she was: in the last five years that she served the Ceartas army she had made a name for herself rapidly; even though it happened unintentionally. Even so, she had raised admiration among the soldiers, especially the younger ones, and for the girls she had become a role model.

Most soldiers saw joining the army as following a child's dream for the excitement and adventure. Only a few saw it as their duty to actually protect their country. Tirsa didn't do it for any of that; she had not even been born in Ceartas. Her reasons were personal and idealistic. When she was on a mission or fought in a battle; she did it with her whole heart and always for the benefit of the common good.

Only a few knew her true reasons, but her natural charismatic beauty, her courage and perseverance touched all. She never acted as if she was any different; she knew she had earned her title, but she treated everyone in the army with the same kind of respect. One of her nicknames was "The Snake" because of her lack of words and fast, skilful, sudden

attacks on her opponents, her bright green eyes, which could glow in the dark some said, and slim lithe body. But she was also called “The Flower of Knights” or even “Golden Angel” because of her soft spot for animals and people; even the roughest, toughest of soldiers she could soften with her compassion and almost innocent, sometimes naïve, ways.

As Tirsia got nearer the crowd shifted its attention away from her, for it was not only her they waited for. She overheard some discussions between a small chubby woman and the other maids and servants. It was funny how people of the same rank gathered together in little groups and hardly mixed at all. The soldiers grouped together, the guards and the maids and servants, like it was an unwritten rule. Birds of a feather flocking together, she smiled faintly.

‘It’s about time she made an effort to find herself a husband,’ the chubby woman stated. It was only after a moment Tirsia realised who they were talking about.

Is that what she told her people? What a lie indeed!

‘Yeah, about time I should say, she will be what, twenty-nine this year?’

‘Maybe he can tame her a little, if she can find one suitable enough to her liking that is.’

‘Ssst, it is hard enough already to find a suitable candidate being a queen and all.’

‘Pff, I say she is just too picky to find anyone good enough for her bizarre wishes!’

Suddenly she felt someone tapping on her shoulder. She turned around to look in the grey eyes of an older female soldier. ‘Shades!’ They fell in each other’s arms. This woman had taught her the ground principles of being a knight.

‘What a surprise! How did you know?’

‘Tirsa, I am so glad to see you, dear.’ The older woman had a good look at her, still holding her by the shoulders, which made her feel a little uncomfortable.

‘We are stationed here for a couple of days to await further orders from our commander.’

Tirsa nodded. They had not seen each other in months, but she knew she was still in the second company as their physical and mental trainer; a company caretaker. Most recruits started in that same company, like she had herself.

‘How are you, Shades?’ she asked sincerely.

The woman smiled a broad smile, showing more wrinkles around her eyes than Tirsa remembered. ‘Fine, just fine, and you?’

‘All right I guess.’ She had no time to explain everything to her, which according to Artride should be safe, for she was also a knight. But she knew she was not allowed to tell. The queen had been very clear about that. Therefore she also didn’t tell about her brother being imprisoned, and it was obvious Shades didn’t know yet. Tirsa, herself, had seen his name on a list among other breakers of the law, which was not a very long list; so she immediately had recognised his name that unforgettable yesterday morning.

‘Did you lose some weight, commander?’ Shades promptly asked, a little sternly.

More than just weight I am afraid ... ‘I suppose.’ She answered plainly.

‘You ought to take care of yourself; you have an important mission ahead so I’ve heard. My, my.’ Her tone of voice was a bit disdainful.

‘I’m a big girl,’ she retorted sharply.

‘I know darling, but something isn’t right. Artride looking for a husband? Do you know something about the true mission?’ she whispered.

‘What are you suggesting? You don’t believe it?’

Shades kept her voice low while she led Tirsa away from all those bustling people. ‘It just doesn’t make any sense to me. I’ve been in this army quite some years now and I have learned that she and her father have always been a bit different in their ways; even a little unconventional at times; but leaving with only one guard? Is she out of her mind with all the objections against her ruling going around? A perfect opportunity to have her murdered, even if she has you for a guard, I say.’

Tirsa drew a sharp breath and explained, ‘She just doesn’t want a parade. It happened before; remember the story of King Macdin leaving with only one guard at his side when he visited Vortiar for the duration of two days? Nothing happened to him.’

‘I know, but he was undercover in an away mission. This is not safe, I am telling you; for both of you actually. Other countries will know about her leaving in a matter of hours, and could very well try to ambush and kill her in order to conquer the country – and you might have an enemy or two yourself, remember? Now why doesn’t she bring along more men for both your safety?’

‘I trust she has thought all about that, Shades. Perhaps she will go undercover as well after we have left this crowd. At least nobody knows where we are heading. I don’t think she worries about herself, or someone taking the castle and the country.’ She found herself thinking about the Law Book. *It will not let anyone conquer Ceartas. I bet if she is killed, the rules in the book will name some relative as a new king or queen. It is just for show anyway.* However, she reminded herself to ask the queen about it;

for it was indeed a little strange also for the people of Ceartas, even if the country was well protected.

‘Well, you can’t blame me for worrying about you; you on your own out there without a company. Obviously you know what you are doing, but please do not tell me she has you under her spell as well; you “The Snake”?’

Tirsa looked uncomfortable when Shades mentioned a spell, but realised she was talking about the pull and influence of the queen on people. Shades noticed Tirsa regaining her nerves. ‘She is not that bad, Shades,’ she reflected uncomfortably. The other woman just shook her head; her chin length greying brown hair lightly touched her cheeks. One cheek was decorated with three thin pink scars; the reminder of a foreign weapon attack years before she had met Tirsa.

‘Ah, she bewitched you too with that brilliant beauty of hers; I know you far too well, darling.’

Tirsa flushed a little. ‘You can say anything you want about her, but she is still our queen and no matter what, we have to respect her!’ Shades opened her mouth to respond, but then they both heard the buzzing chatter interspersed with loud cheers. ‘The queen, it’s the queen!’ and all eyes focussed on the castle doors.

Many guards surrounded Artride; she also recognised bald Jaromir between them and with mixed feelings she observed him. Concern troubled his face this time, however. Of course, he did not agree with the queen leaving without him, or *with* Tirsa, for that matter.

Bewitched ... She thought about the words of the older woman, good old Shades. She never doubted or even questioned the caretakers’ opinions before. However, she had to admit to herself that this was indeed awkward; this big scene of the queen leaving and only with one guard, and

of all the people it had to be *her*, as if it was all planned. Artride only knew her but a day. Was she telling Tirsa the whole truth? She stared at the appealing, charismatic woman walking confidently across the square, smiling faintly at her trusty servants who bowed and kneeled before her.

No longer dressed as a queen, she wore normal riding clothes; tight fitting velvet black leggings with black leather laced boots and a knee length reddish brown sleeveless surcoat with a green one underneath. Undercover indeed ... In addition she wore a long blue coat with a hood, which flapped behind her like a cape. She wore her long raven black hair in a simple long braid at her neck.

All the eyes of the people were fixed on her while she seemed to glide over the grey, flat stones in dignity and with grace; nodding and smiling politely. Even in these clothes, it was obvious she was the natural leader of the people. However, powerful though she was and came across as, it was still in an innocent pure way; for she was neither vain nor proud. Tirsa realised this, and finally saw with her own eyes the effect she had on the people, with her natural kind of grace and beauty.

Tirsa noticed her searching the crowd for her, and when their gaze met the queen smiled, reassured, and the knight felt swollen with pride that she of all people had her full attention. What had she done to deserve that kind of look?

‘Good morning, Commander, it is good to see you ready.’

‘Good morning, Your Highness.’ She bowed slightly.

Her gaze landed on her mare with interest. ‘A fine steed.’ Her own steed was brought in moments; she had it packed herself earlier that morning. Tirsa noticed he was not that young, but he still appeared to be strong, elegant, and had shining black hair almost as vivid as that of its rider.

‘I hope they will get along,’ the queen remarked, smiling warmly, touching the mare’s nose gently.

‘I am sure they will.’

Artride grabbed the pommel of the saddle, pulling herself up onto the horse’s back in one quick movement, and Tirsa followed her example.

They both heard loud noises coming from the crowd in the outer square. Artride breathed in deeply as if to strengthen herself and commanded in a loud voice, ‘Guards, open the gate to the outer square!’ Tirsa instantly remembered Shades and found her standing between the others again. They waved at each other. Tirsa thought she saw a tear blinking in one of the woman’s eyes, but she could not be sure.

There were many guards to keep the people of Satrea under control as they cheered and waved.

Tirsa rode before the queen, as was the rule, to protect her from any threat. She had a good look around; but saw only happy people.

Slowly they rode towards the outer gate, which was fully open by now, and the lowered drawbridge, with accompanied cheers.

When they left the crowd behind Artride clutched at her reins and overtook her suddenly, ordering her to follow. Tirsa had some idea which route they would be taking to reach Dochas, but did not feel at ease. They crossed the Royal Valley and entered a wood full of old beech trees with many spring flowers underneath. The fresh air carried the scent of dawn and the sweet smell of new leaves. Birds called out in the canopy overhead and they spotted a small group of red deer which curiously stared at them before sprinting away, alarmed by the thudding hooves of the horses. Sand rose in clouds beneath the horses’ feet.

It was a still, grey morning with almost no wind; as if the country was holding its breath in anticipation for what was coming.

The hard path covered with dark brown soil, was wide enough to ride side by side, but Tirsa didn't think that was appropriate, for it could mean they were equals and she certainly did not want Artride to think she would be thinking that. The queen slowed to a trot so that Tirsa had to slow down as well. Curiously, she turned her upper body in the saddle to look at her bodyguard.

'What is the matter, Commander? Are you afraid I shall bite if you come too close?' she said with a hidden sneer.

'I think I hear horses behind us. It is very likely we will be followed, my Lady. It is safer if I ride behind you,' she answered plainly. 'And I believe it's also the rule?' she added gingerly.

'Do not worry about that one; it is up to me to decide. And I have ordered my guard to stop anyone trying to follow us and they will do their jobs well, Tirsa. So do not be troubled. Come and ride beside me.'

'Does anyone know where we are going?' she asked obeying the queen's order.

'No, not even the Head of the Guard.'

Tirsa smiled amused, coming a little closer so she could smell her flowerlike fresh scent.

'So Jaromir too believes you are on a mission to find a husband?'

Artride had to suppress her giggle, which wasn't easy for her when she thought about the nervous, unsettling expression on his face, earlier.

'Won't the book punish you for that?' And Tirsa had to rephrase herself as it had sounded as if the book had a mind of its own, 'I mean: the curse on the book.'

'For telling a lie? Oh, no, not at all. The Royal Family is excluded from being punished for telling a lie like this, for a lot of things actually

we are excused. In fact we are obliged, and sometimes even obligated to lie’

She had a sudden sad look in her occupied eyes, but smiled at Tirsa who was riding beside her now. ‘Good, this will be a long journey and it will be much nicer if you do not have to look at both my backside and my steed’s all the time.’

‘Are you sure it is a good idea to have just me along as a guard? More soldiers to protect you until we reach Dochas wouldn’t have hurt. In fact, if we reach Dochas at all unhurt it will be a small miracle. There are many people who will try to take this opportunity to do you harm – even if that will probably mean the end of their own lives as well.’

The queen’s expression was sad. ‘I realise that all too well, that is why I have ordered a dozen of my guards to stay close by, at least for today; that is probably what you heard before. Good for you on that one; praise for your good hearing and senses Commander. After today, we shall take a very unlikely route no one will ever suspect, and I have ordered the guards to go back before nightfall. No one may know where we are going.’

‘Why couldn’t we have just sneaked away quietly, without the crowd seeing us leave, without an announcement?’

‘I wish we could have. The book would not have let us leave; I had to have my intentions announced by law for a longer journey. I was going to tell you.’ And she refrained from telling Tirsa about the punishment the queen herself would have gotten if she hadn’t done so: indescribable pains in her stomach the longer she would have stayed away from Ceartas, from the castle and the book until her return.

‘It is a plausible story I made up, even the book cannot deny. Royalty have to marry and finding a husband comes with it. However, our lives will be worth nothing if we do not undertake this quest, Tirsa. To not

be able to truly live, to have a book rule your life and everyone in your country, your brother ... A little risk is unavoidable. From what I have heard, you are worth ten soldiers anyway; so why should I worry? I feel safe enough. Now keep your voice down, who knows who is listening. Come on.'

The Book?

And off they went side by side in a pleasant trot.

Tirsa almost whispered when she asked after about an hour, never losing sight of the road ahead and the open countryside surrounding them, side glancing at the queen's stuffed saddlebags, 'May I see the book later on, My Lady?'

'Oh, I do not have it with me.'

'You don't? Won't you need it when we have found this sorceress so she can work on a counter spell?'

'I sincerely hope not; for I can only remove the book two days travel away from the castle; that is about as far as any border with our neighbouring countries, before it will return itself to its special chamber in Tarac. I have tried. Since our journey will be considerably longer, there is no point in bringing it. '

'But then we have to take a spell back with us. How is that going to work?'

'That is what I'm hoping for, well; if she is that powerful, perhaps she can produce one, or otherwise I shall invite her over to Ceartas and reward her very generously. I have decided I will bestow her anything she asks for in return, within reason. Although I have no clue what that might be; if she is powerful she might not have the need for anything, so we shall see.' The queen clutched her reins tightly and urged her horse to go a little

faster while clearing her mind by taking deep breaths. Tirsa reckoned she didn't want to discuss it further.

After some time riding at a monotonous pace, Artride asked her what she had been doing for the remainder of yesterday and early morning that day. In a businesslike voice, Tirsa relayed what she wanted to know. Artride in return told her about her visiting her brother Elimar, who was happy to receive her letter and had regained hope. She had ordered the dungeon guard to treat him well.

'I have noticed he is very proud of you,' the queen added. Tirsa shrugged her shoulders, relieved that he was doing fine and then shook her head. 'He sees me as his great example, foolish boy.'

'Why foolish?'

Tirsa stroked one hand through the long soft manes of her mount, before she answered,

'He doesn't know anything about what it means to be a soldier; the wars, the violence, and the suffering; all those lives lost. All he thinks about is the Knight's Code and honour. He is too sensitive; it will destroy him.'

Artride looked curiously at the other woman. She didn't know much about the rough and tumble of wars or about being a knight, but she could imagine and emphasize quite a bit. That ability was important to understand people and essential to lead them.

'Did it destroy you?' she asked without thinking, but regretted it instantly when she saw the hurt expression on Tirsa's face.

She held her head low at the sudden direct question as if she wanted to hide. It was obvious it had startled her and made her think about things that she did not want to think about. Tirsa strained to block her feelings.

‘Let’s just say it changed me.’ Her fists squeezed the leather tack of the horse tightly.

‘I am sorry.’

Tirsa looked her deeply in the eyes and her face lit up. ‘Don’t be. I have learned a lot and we accomplished peace, did we not?’

It is as if she wants me to comfort her by saying: ‘Yes, they did not die for nothing, Artride thought and felt bad when she remarked, ‘Yes, we certainly did, Commander.’

Tirsa nodded with a tight face and after a while asked her about how her meeting with King Zoltas went.

‘Very well, indeed. He gave me his word to relieve all of the men left alive at the border, who were responsible for the fuss, of their duty and train a better company. He will make stricter measures and even asked me about our law system. He wanted some rules as an example to punish any violators! I said, according to the law, we would have let them go as well; however, I did not mention anything about the severe whipping our violators would have received though. I couldn’t ...’

‘The discharge from service is already a big humiliation among soldiers, my Lady; so it should be enough. I reckon they can never serve the army again?’

‘That is part of the punishment for violating a peace treaty; in Zoltas as well. I trust his confirmation that this will not happen again. I have his signature on that. As a king he will be in serious trouble if his army violates the treaty; if he doesn’t want to face a war. But there is nothing to accomplish from warfare, other than land maybe, and riches.’

The rest of the morning they spent crossing the large open Royal Wood with Tirsa peeking cautiously about her, and at noon they reached expansive green hilly fields, leaving the Royal area. Tirsa knew the way by

heart, but the queen doubted and stared dubiously on her map the old woman had drawn for her. She was not at all familiar with this area.

‘If we cross these hills westwards and ascend the mountain,’ Tirsa pointed out, ‘then we will be at the border river Dunzel by nightfall.’ Artride glanced approvingly at her. ‘I believe you are right. You have a map in your head?’

‘I have to, but I travelled so much in these parts I know it quite well by heart. Everyone can lose a map. Never trust on a piece of paper.’ She pointed at her head. ‘But this here is mostly right.’

They had a quick lunch and rest before riding off in the direction of the high rugged peaked mountains. The sky was clouded with tin coloured clouds and only occasionally, they saw a thin bleak sun. It was the kind of weather that made you sweat when you moved around and shiver when you rested. Artride gave her guard the signal to return while the two of them pretended to head north.

The remaining day they spent crossing the first mountain range that was a natural border, with the only land lying to the west; Dochas. Eventually it stretched all the way to the sea; a sea no human had ever seen –; no human outside of Dochas that was; if the stories were right about no men living within its boundaries, save for the sorceress, if they were to believe the old lady.

It was not reachable by boat either, as if it was magically protected, ships had never been able to sail the waters around Dochas. Was this mysterious, clearly powerful person, if she was responsible for all this, even human?

Besides, from fear of the Magical Land, people did not easily climb these mountains either to reach it; for it was very steep and treacherous indeed, and no one ever did make it back.

As they made their way through the pass, crossing one ridge after another, the two women were quiet and concentrated. Their mounts were sturdy, but had a hard time with the rocky and muddy path. Only a few weeks before, the snow had begun to melt in this area and as a result, there were many small streaming rivers and slippery soil, and moreover, loose rocks. There were even vast lakes in the mountain meadows with flocks of all kinds of water birds.

Here the air was pregnant with springtime; they could smell its sweet, fresh scent rising from the mixed woods below them and the grassy mountain meadows. There were many tiny bright flowers with thick or prickled leaves, growing in the watery area and other plants that adapted themselves to the constant wind. The flowers already attracted early butterflies with colourful fragile wings and humming bees. Tirsa's horse faithfully climbed on and on whilst she stood up in her saddle, making it easier on her to ascend. And she thought about the old advice from a horse to its rider from an old tale she once heard: 'Do not make me run down a decline, do not urge me going up a hill, but spare me not on level ground.' She had made her own version of that; 'Uphill spare me; downhill bear me; plain way, spare me not; let me not drink when I am hot.' Tirsa always treated her horse kindly and with respect.

When they reached the highest top, the view was breathtaking. Ceartas was nothing but green woods, both broad leaf and pine with its lowlands in the distance. When they looked in the direction of Dochas, it was also nothing but woodland, except for the high, snow-capped mountains rising like a grey and white wall behind the woods. The border river lay well hidden down beneath the canopy of leaves. The sky was not clear enough to see all the way to the ocean, which at a rough estimate lay a dozen days travel away.

On the mountaintop they found a cairn of small rocks, which was unmistakably made by other travellers marking their presence.

Sometimes the two of them spoke a few words or exchanged a look, no more. The commander and the queen felt minuscule in this dramatic landscape.

Descending the mountain was a lot easier and quicker for the horses, although they still had to pay attention to the ground beneath their feet. In the afternoon, they left the mountains behind and entered a huge, dark ancient pinewood.

Tirsa stared at the enormous pine trees, unable to see their tops, and their branches were covered with so many green needles no light could ever reach the damp, cold brown floor.

‘Amazing,’ was the only thing Artride could say.

‘I have heard about these woods; some call it the Silent Place,’ Tirsa started in a calm voice. ‘For they say no sound can be heard from within. Every sound you make is caught and swallowed by the trees.’

Artride turned to Tirsa, looking a little frightened. ‘But we haven’t even reached the Magical Land yet.’ Tirsa gave her a mysterious look as she responded, ‘Who said no magic can be found outside of Dochas?’ and softly urged her horse to ride on with a soft dig of her heels, leaving an astonished queen behind.

‘Commander wait.’

They rode side by side, crossing the Silent Place and Artride whispered as if to comfort herself, ‘This is not that different from any other pine wood; at least it smells the same as any other!’ She breathed in deeply the sweet smell of needles and resin.

Occasionally a single small sunbeam managed to break through the thick-needled branches and those transparent misty sunbeams did seem

magical indeed. Artride rode through such a beam, and its pale, white-bluish light shone on her hair, clothes and delicate face, while she looked around in amazement. She looked very much like a ghost.

Silence; absolute stillness, other than the sounds they made, the hooves of the horses and their occasional breezes. Where could you find this outside in the wild? And in springtime while everything burst with life? No birds, small mammals, rustling of leaves, no activity whatsoever. It did seem odd to them, and made them feel a little uneasy as they urged the horses to ride faster.

Why does it frighten us so much? Artride thought. Because it is unnatural? This is a wild wood; no human interference, what is more natural than that?

Tirsa thought she found the answer: *We are not used to complete silence. At this moment we are completely one with ourselves for there are no sounds to disturb us; covering up our true self, and our own voice. If you are scared then you fear your own inner voice, which is you!* She could hear her inner voice so clearly as never before, almost like someone else was talking to her. It was like meditating really, which she used to do when she was younger, though only if she could block out her own thoughts, and that wasn't always easy. There was emptiness inside of her and she could actually hear her own blood rushing in her ears. When she looked at Artride's face; she could see she was turned inward as well.

'Do you think,' a few moments later Artride wondered out aloud, trying to break the almost deafening silence, 'that the gods can hear us when we speak in this forest?'

Tirsa did not know Artride to be a religious person, considering the fact that the Royal Family saw itself as divine. At least that was how it used to be, she was told.

She patted her horse on the side of the neck and thought about answering her question a brief moment later, 'If they, or any divine being can hear us, this will be the place for it.'

Artride smiled thankfully back, with both her eyes and mouth. 'Then I suggest we state our business out loud and pray out loud, so it knows.'

Tirsa pierced her lips tight as if she was not sure about that. *What if someone else hears it?*

But then she thought whilst glancing around, *Who? We are alone here!* She finally nodded; not wanting to oppose her.

'Give me your hand,' Artride suddenly demanded in a friendly manner.

'My Lady?'

'Your hand, please Tirsa. If I can call you by your name that is.' *Call me by my name, why would she want to do that?*

Reluctantly she stretched her hand and nodded. Artride took her hand gently in hers and closed her own warm fingers around her cold hand, shutting her eyes while she cleared her throat. 'Holy Spirits, please hear us, your children Artride Ceartas and Tirsa Lathabris.' No titles were mentioned; Tirsa guessed Artride knew that that was of no importance here.

Tirsa winced when she spoke her name aloud, in one sentence with that of the queen. All of a sudden, it was so real; as if she, as a person, her identity was somehow acknowledged now that her name was spoken aloud by the queen and addressed to the Holy Spirits by her. All mighty beings.

Suddenly it was all a little too much for her; her hand in that of the queen, someone she had always despised for her lack of backbone, but who had turned out to be more of a real queen than she had ever thought she

would be. In standing so close to that powerful woman, smelling her light blossom perfume that made her feel drugged, she had to act strongly.

‘We do not ask much,’ Artride continued, almost whispering. ‘Let us find the one person, please, who can undo the powerful curse on the Law Book of Ceartas. Let this being help us to help our land and its people be free of the curse. Guide us on our journey. Thank you.’

Tirsa stood motionless staring at the queen who bowed her head in respect. She suddenly opened one eye and locked it onto hers. Quickly Tirsa shut hers. She could hear both their breathing; maybe if she listened closely enough she could hear her own heart beat, maybe even that of the queen!

Artride breathed in deeply as if to catch the moment, it sounded very close. Her ears hurt from the silence; it was closing in on her mind in an increasingly unpleasant way.

‘We’d better go.’ Tirsa let go of her hand reluctantly.

They mounted their horses, riding through the abnormally silent dense forest for a few more miles, before it got lighter again. They reached a mixed wood and heard a Nightingale sing his melodious song. They both smiled, relieved, and had to admit they had felt a little trapped; as if the tree trunks and their branches had been bars of a large prison with endless walls.

‘We have to keep the sun ahead of us. That looks like a small track we can follow, my Lady.’

‘Fair enough, let’s go,’ she enthusiastically announced.

On one occasion they crossed a rocky valley surrounded by high cliffs and rode aside a large flock of small reindeer. They did not seem to care about the two horses with the two women at all, aside from a little curiosity and watchful eye.

At nightfall, which was almost as dark blue as the cloak of Artride, they discovered the constant rush of water between the trees. ‘The river!’ Artride called out in pure joy, she jumped off her horse and began to run. Tirsa followed her with the horses at a slower pace.

Ducks flew away, their wings flapping and together they watched them take wing and vanish from eyesight.

‘If only we could fly,’ Artride sighed longingly.

It appeared to be a broad, fast flowing river and Tirsa knew it was the Dunzel; the border river. She stared at the riverbank. ‘I hope the bridge is not too far away. It might be safer not to camp too close to it anyway.’ So they decided to stay overnight at the sheltered riverbank.

Tirsa was busy unsaddling the horses and caring for them, and did not hear Artride’s humming. She noticed her drink the fresh, cold water and splash water in her face. Tirsa walked over to the river with the horses to let them also drink.

Soon afterwards, Tirsa gathered branches, grass, moss and leaves to make some sort of shelter in case it rained during the night.

Artride offered her help, but Tirsa shook her head.

‘Absolutely not. You rest while I do this, my Lady.’

‘Please, stop calling me that, Tirsa.’ She looked up from her work and asked in a calm, but slightly mocking voice, ‘Should I call you “Highness” then or “Majesty?” *like Jaromir*...

Artride was stunned and twisted her mouth in agony, but did not remark. Her face had said enough. It had hurt her, clearly, and Tirsa flushed a little, turning her face away. She was sorry and promised herself she would not upset her again.

As Tirsa was making camp, Artride cared for the horses, examining their hooves, cleaning them and feeding them with forage. When Tirsa had

finished making their shelter, located between two trees, she started scavenging for firewood. She came back with an armload of old sticks, and with flint and steel from the pouch on her belt she made sparks that fell on the dry kindling. Preparing dinner on the campfire also went professionally and fast. Artride brought her some dried herbs to add to the broth she was making, to be of use. It was getting cold at the riverside, therefore Artride sat down on a blanket she had spread in front of the warm glow of the fire, staring around at the cosy shelter, and pots and pans.

‘The camp is perfect, Commander.’

While they ate, they watched the dark flowing river. It was a very peaceful place.

‘According to the map, the bridge must be here somewhere,’ Artride said quietly after swallowing a bite from the hot vegetable stew. It was dusk now, but because of the campfire, they could see just about enough. The foliage softly rustled, like the constant river, and the fire popped and hissed.

‘Hmm,’ Tirsa nodded in agreement, the flames dancing in her eyes and after a moment asked in a subdued voice, ‘My Lady, what will happen with Ceartas if you die?’

Artride, who looked up from the map surprised, saw concerned honesty in her green flickering eyes.

‘If I die ... well that would not be a problem for the Law Book. According to the Law, the brother of my father shall inherit the throne. He shall have as much influence as me, being the new king, so the curse continues to have power,’ and she smiled wickedly.

Tirsa had not heard of him before, but she gathered from the tone in her voice that she was not too pleased about him. ‘But I do not plan on

dying just yet,' she reassured her.

Everybody dies and some of us too soon ... Tirsa tried to ignore her inner voice.

'Yes, but I still feel ... You must admit this is rather perilous with just me to protect you.'

'I feel safe enough with you, Commander.'

'I feel honoured, but still, with three or four more we could have protected you properly, formed a wall around you.'

She sighed. 'You be my wall then.' Her eyelids drooped a bit. Tirsa looked away to avoid her intense staring, almost longing eyes. She stretched her legs, rubbing her knees and sighed again.

'Oh, I know you disagree and think me foolish, but like I said before I do not trust many people enough for this to be kept a secret. You know what they say, a secret is hardly a secret if more than one person knows about it anyway, and it puts a terrible burden on the people knowing; a deadly burden.'

'You could have made them swear on their lives or something; we knights are very loyal, we are not soldiers who fight because we have to. No we have chosen this path and we would die out of ... love for our country and you.'

Artride stared for a short moment at Tirsa in wonderment.

'Hmm. Like I said, I did not want to risk too many good knights.'

Just me then. Will I end up as a personal bodyguard?

'And so as not to raise any suspicion in the sorceress.'

Tirsa nodded, but still had her doubts.

'So, Tirsa, if you do not mind me asking; why did you become a knight? I mean you are a bright young woman and I have heard you are not even from Ceartas. Surely you could think of other ... things to do?'

Artride noticed that she begun to laugh a little nervously.

‘Other things ... I guess so, but not as noble as this.’

‘Ah, I knew it, so you have noble reasons? Tell me more.’

Tirsa placed another couple of branches on the hissing fire. If the queen wanted to sit a little longer instead of sleeping, it was fine with her, but why did they have to talk about *her*, why not about their mission? Well, Tirsa thought calmly, what else was there to say about that, which had not already been said? She was tired, but also very calm and at ease sitting together with her queen as if they were on a camping trip. That thought make her smile. Artride saw it.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘Us; sitting here. I never sat down beside a cosy campfire with a queen before, have you?’ she joked. Artride laughed showing her perfect white teeth. It was a wonderful laugh.

‘Perhaps you should not consider me a queen while we are out here, and maybe you shouldn’t even call me that, not before I can be one. Call me Artride, if it doesn’t make you too uncomfortable. And I think it is best to be undercover anyway.’

‘As you wish.’ Tirsa smiled back at her.

There was a moment of silence; a natural evening silence this time. Artride rested her arms on her knees and relaxed.

‘Will you share your story with me, Tirsa? I would be honoured. We have enough time ahead of us, why not spend it getting to know each other? We are both persons behind our rank; I hope I may see you as one too, like I hope you will consider me.’

There was a short silence and a stir in the air.

Tirsa smiled faintly. ‘I didn’t think you were interested. My reasons for joining the army are very personal, but ... I will tell you.’

She smiled pleasantly. 'Only if you want to, I'm not forcing you.'

'No one can force me to do anything I don't want to really!' and she let out a wheezing laugh. 'But I reckon if you want to know me, you have to know my story.' She saw the features of her father before her inner eye and felt a painful sting in her heart.

'I suppose it all began with my ... dad. He died when I was very young, at age six. He taught me so much and I loved him greatly,' she said with a tiny clear voice. She could talk about it now; after all those years, sometimes telling her closest friends; always remembering and honouring him, but still missing his kind good-natured spirit terribly, and the father figure in her life.

'I am sorry to hear that, but if it comforts you, I know what it is like to lose a parent. I have been there too; but you were so young, young enough to remember him. Was he a knight then?'

'Yes, he was. He served Ceartas.'

'Did he die in battle?'

Tirsa dug into her memories and began to tell while she stared straight-faced distantly into the flames.

'I was there that day on the moor; I ... I saw everything when they came for him.' Artride noticed the change in her voice and her trouble speaking at all, but she continued, with a knot building in her throat. 'Strange men on horses. My parents, older sister and I lived really isolated in the woods. I had never seen other people before in my life until then; so I got truly scared. Especially as never before did I see my father so terrified.' She tried to remember his face, which was a blur in her mind now; only vaguely was he there before her inner eye.

'He ordered me to run and hide, and not to look back. He made me promise that. Of course I couldn't at first, for I didn't want to leave him

behind. But he shouted at me; something he had never done before.’ She had to pause and Artride glanced, rather upset, at the younger woman who was rubbing her hands nervously.

‘I kept running, until I found some sort of shallow burrow where I hid myself. My father ran in another direction and the soldiers chased him on their horses. They carried swords; he had none. I ... broke my promise and witnessed everything. They beat him again and again. He fought back, but it was no use, there were too many of them and they finally stabbed him to death.’

Artride came to sit closer as if to ease her. She never expected to hear such an answer when she had asked that question. She had turned pale, from distress, like a full moon.

‘I am sorry for your loss, Tirsa,’ she said, and after a couple of silent minutes asked, ‘Who were those men and why did they do such a horrid thing?’

‘Soldiers.’ Her shoulders sagged and she dropped her head, beginning to tug uneasily at the branch in her hands she used to poke the fire with. ‘I found a cloak brooch near the body of my father. It showed a curved mythical creature with the head and body of a wolf, wings of an eagle interlaced with one sword and one arrow.’

‘Razoras,’ Artride said hatefully. ‘Of course, no other country breeds such cruel uncivilised men.’ She quickly glanced from the fire back at Tirsa. ‘Did your mother report the murder?’

‘It didn’t happen in Ceartas.’

‘Oh yes, of course. Where did it happen?’

‘In Zoria.’

Artride nodded and remembered her guard Barkor telling her where Tirsa was born. Zoria was a small country with a thin population widely

spread about. It was a neighbouring country of Ceartas; so that explained why her father served that army, as Zoria was well protected by Ceartas who had none. She pictured a young man, full of enthusiasm and awaiting adventure before the real revelation of war and destruction began.

‘My mother was devastated. She never fully recovered.’

‘And what about you?’ Tirsa did not return her gaze.

What do you expect? However, she answered calmly, ‘I couldn’t wait until I grew up to have my revenge. I did not know the name of those brutal men, but I remembered their faces and their laughs. And I had that brooch so I knew where to go to.’ She resolved to see if there were any stars in the sky, but it was still clouded; only the brightest cast their distant lights on them once in a while between the clouds.

‘I didn’t tell my mother I was going to avenge him. I was only going to tell her when I got even. But the only things I knew about weapons were from my dad, and we buried his sword with him. My mother wanted it that way.’

‘No one could help you? I mean justice does not have to involve death does it? Punishment yes, but ...’

‘Justice is the result of doing the right thing,’ Tirsa interrupted, ‘To make things right, and only the heart knows best, and that’s different for everyone. I just could not rest until I had killed that man. For my father, my mother, sister and myself; for the years taken away from us. True, we would not get my father back by killing his killers. But at least a murderer like that – going around hurting and destroying people’s lives – would not kill anyone else anymore, ever. My father would surely have agreed. I am sure my father’s army friends might have helped me, but my mother wanted to bury him at home and did not want to have contact with the outside world at all. And nobody knew where we lived exactly; my parents

wanted it that way.’ Artride wondered why this was so, but did not ask; remembering it was Tirsa’s story she wanted to hear first.

‘So you went to Ceartas on your own?’

‘It was my destiny. When I was sixteen, knights spotted our location, well ... they spotted me, to be specific. I happened to swim in the lake near our house when I heard horses and people. You can imagine how frightened I was. I still had a clear image of that terrible day printed on my brain, ten years earlier.’

Artride wanted to ask who they were, but contained herself, and let Tirsa tell the story uninterrupted.

‘I tried to escape by swimming underwater and climbing out at the other side to flee, but they were already there. I was surrounded. I jumped back in the water and dove again to hide myself. The water was my only safety, but obviously I couldn’t hold my breath forever and had to come up again. Then I heard them yell and beg me to come out. I wasn’t stupid; I did not trust other humans. While catching my breath I got a good look at them and saw five men and three women looking worried and somewhat fragile. I followed my intuition and decided not to fear them. A woman wrapped me up in her cloak.’

That woman was Shades. When Tirsa thought back about those exciting days, she felt herself glowing with happiness. She always considered them to be angels, coming to bring her to another stage of her life. And a completely new life it was.

‘They were knights of Ceartas,’ Tirsa explained to an astonished-looking queen.

‘Oh, now I see.’

‘They were very kind to me. I learned that they were lost in our woods and needed my help to find a way back. Can you imagine: me

completely naked and vulnerable surrounded by big frightened warriors lost in the woods!’ Artride flushed at the thought and chuckled.

‘They didn’t even think I was human at first, but some sort of water fairy about to fly away!’

It was indeed the beginning of a whole new life for Tirsa, and she told the queen how the knights stayed a few days at their house and that even her mother, who wasn’t pleased in the beginning, slowly melted and enjoyed the company for a change. One of them even kept coming back several times to her mother until he finely stole her heart and they fell in love.

‘Nalis, a very kind man,’ Tirsa told her. ‘They live happy together in our house in Zoria. He even raised Elimar as his own.’

She saw Artride looking rather doubtful. ‘But, when I make a quick adding up, Elimar is twelve right? So he cannot be your father’s child, because he is deceased for more than twelve years and he can’t be Nalis’ as they met ten years ago.’

‘That’s very perceptive. My father has been dead for sixteen years this year, to be precise. Yes, Elimar is my half-brother.’

‘But you said your mother did not socialise with other people all those years before Ceartas’ knights came?’

Tirsa sighed. ‘She didn’t. She was raped four years after my father died.’

‘O, Great Spirits, no.’ *Is there anything this girl and her family isn’t spared from?*

‘When I was older she told me where my baby brother came from. I remember the day my sister got very ill, running a high fever and hallucinating and she needed the help of a local medicine man as our herbs were not curing her. I was only ten and too young to go, so I nursed my

sister. It was a two-day trip for Mom to get there. When she got back, she brought a medicine. It cured my sister all right, as the medicine man had promised. He also gave my mother a full belly.'

'No! How awful!' Artride whispered with her mouth hanging open.

Welcome to the real world! 'Well yes, her body that one time was the only price he wanted from her so she had given herself to him. She claims there was no violence involved really; but I still see it as rape and my sister blames herself terribly, even today.' She sighed. 'But we were all happy with Elimar of course.'

'Does he know?'

Tirsa nodded. 'More or less; knowing my mother, she told a different, nicer story; that he already existed within her sleeping; awaiting to be brought to life and that an angel in the village, where she got the medicine from, did so. He is old enough to understand the real truth; but as long as my mother isn't sorry, he is not.'

'Now I understand why your mother isolated herself and her family. What was her reaction when you joined the army?'

'It helped that Dad had been a knight and Nalis is one too. She understood that I had to do what I had to do after ... some time.'

'I bet she is proud now.'

Tirsa completed her story by telling her how she finally went to Ceartas two years after she first met the Ceartas knights. Shades had promised she could sign up if she turned eighteen.

'A long and thorough training followed; for both my body and soul, but I was determined.'

'But still to revenge your father?'

Tirsa fixed her eyes on her, incredulously. The queen felt brainless for asking.

‘That was my only goal. What did I have to do with Ceartas and its people? However, ... slowly it became more than that; somehow I came to believe I could change the world; fight evil and all that.’

Even though it was not her world at all.

‘Noble indeed.’ *And naïve*, Artride thought and was curious enough to ask, ‘Did you succeed; I mean did you get your revenge?’

The fire was dimming slowly and when a breeze blew Artride’s way, she was breathing smoke, she coughed. When she stopped, she saw Tirsa grinning.

‘Of course.’ She began to tell her when she had had the opportunity as a beginner to meet and study the Razoras in their last war nearly four years ago. How she became a predator in her search for her pray and found at least one of them; one of the murderers of her father. She could not be any luckier.

‘Anger helped me to get closer to him and fight myself a way towards him. He was well protected, for he was a leader, but I got help from my fellow knights who covered my back. I ... did not know how many I cut down, but ... they say it was a lot. I do not remember anything though, only striking him. I managed to tell him who I was, but that was the worst; he didn’t remember ... and I will never know why my father had to die.’

Artride thought about the story that she had heard from Barkor about Tirsa killing a commander of the Umbraris two years ago; perhaps she had been practising then. And she had also joined the war against the Razoras? That was not such a big country; however, they had been a fierce enemy and the war had been serious. Why didn’t she know? Why hadn’t she learned this during her study? Had they hid it from her, her uncle and

her father's counsellor? Hiding the mere fact that a woman could be capable of those things?

‘You are truly a hero, Tirsa. You were the one who brought peace! I am ashamed I did not know it was you.’ And she shook her head, embarrassed.

‘Not all on my own though. To me it is just that I won my own war. The rest wasn't mine.’ *Still isn't.*

She leaned back in a more comfortable position and yawned.

Artride stretched her legs and thought about what she just had heard, unable to respond.

‘Maybe we should get some rest,’ Tirsa softly announced.

‘Yes, we should,’ she remarked, still thinking about the story she had just heard. She laid a hand on Tirsa's shoulder before walking a few feet to the shelter between the trees.

While Artride lay down and wrapped herself comfortably in the blanket, she watched Tirsa still sitting with her knees tucked to her chest and her arms wrapped around them at the dying campfire.

‘Are you taking watch, Tirsa?’

‘Yes, My Lady.’

‘But surely you need your rest as well.’

‘When we come back I will be able to rest again, I hope; for now your safety is the most important.’ Preserving your life depends on everything. I can't do this alone, can I? I am not of Royal Blood; I could never come close to the damn book to destroy it; even if I found a counter spell for the curse. She is the only one who can. To save my brother, once again, I have to fight a personal war.

Tirsa unsheathed her sword, stared at it for a bit and laid it close beside her; near to hand.

‘I feel very safe now I know you are a slayer,’ Artride said lightly and cheerfully. She had tried to comfort her, but failed of course. All she saw of her was her looming shape in the dark. So when Tirsa did not respond, she got up and said, ‘I am sorry, Tirsa, I did not mean ... I just ...’ and sighed. *I am not as good with people as I should be.*

‘It’s alright, I know what you mean,’ she said with a subdued voice. ‘Goodnight ... Artride.’

Artride lay back on her left side and spoke gently. ‘Goodnight, Tirsa.’

The strip of the sky to the west over the river glittered with stars, and a thin new moon rose high where the sun had set hours before. In the east, it darkened more and she heard an owl hooting in one of the trees behind her. An occasional bat flicked past and swallows flew over with a comforting familiar sound. *Home.*

While Tirsa sat there she thought about the things she had said to the queen; practically her youth in a nutshell. *Why did I do that? Nerves? Trying to be friendly or honest?*

She found herself lacking a practical answer. *Well, she asked me and I just answered, as if I had to. I had no other choice did I? Oh, who cares ...*

Her eyes became heavy, while words and lines of no importance came by and pictures started to emerge.

She was dreaming.

CHAPTER 4

MISTRESS OF HER FATE

Dying can be quick and easy; life is the challenge

*Look around you to see the choice you've made. Look behind you to see
clouded spaces.*

*Look forward and face your fate with dignity. We have to journey without
fear*

Birds called out in the canopy overhead. The night had been chilly, but the improvised bed had proven to be warm enough for Artride, so the temperature did not bother her too much. She had awoken a couple of times though, very much aware of sleeping outside with the roaring river nearby.

Tirsa was already attending breakfast and did not look sleepy at all. Artride assumed she herself must look a bit ruffled with her braid having come loose.

When she stood, stretching her stiff limbs she smiled at her companion, who met her eyes.

‘Good morning, slept well?’

‘Good morning, I slept like a rose, thank you.’ Tirsa gave her a cheese sandwich and a cup of hot tea. They sat down on their folded blankets and ate in silence with just the birdsong around.

Tirsa was very much a night person; craving the stillness and clarity of its dark but enlightening hours. It bothered her she had fallen asleep while she was on night watch, but she did not want to inform the queen of her foolish and dangerous mistake; ashamed as she was.

‘I must say, Tirsa, you look quite relaxed; but you must be exhausted,’ Artride remarked, examining her bodyguard.

She only grinned slyly and ate slowly; as if she was not really hungry.

‘Oh, I nearly forgot.’ Tirsa suddenly remembered, jumping to her feet to hurry off to the grazing horses. She searched through her saddlebags and when she got back handed a small package over to the queen. ‘It’s for you, from a servant who didn’t tell me her name.’

Artride raised her eyebrows and looked surprised. When she opened it, seeing the loaves of bread and biscuits she threw her head backwards, laughing aloud. ‘Ezra!’

Tirsa watched her, feeling happy too.

‘Do you want some?’ she asked her, seeing the surprised look on the other woman’s face.

‘No, thank you.’

‘Me neither, let’s save it for later.’ And she wrapped it up again quickly.

Tirsa nodded, stood up, stretching her limbs and widening her arms, ‘I hope you are not disappointed with the camp, I know it is not exactly what you must be used to.’

The queen glanced at her with wide, astonished eyes. ‘Of course I am not disappointed. This is what I call life! Do you think I enjoy living in a castle; stuck between four cold walls?’ she shook her head violently. ‘I resent it, always did. Not being able to go anywhere without being followed by some guard or servant. Or alone in my room peering through a window and seeing life passing you by? Tirsa, you have no idea how much I enjoy this!’ She glanced around at the trees and the gleaming river reflecting the red golden, early morning sunlight, and took a deep breath.

‘Permission to speak plainly?’

‘Certainly.’

‘Why don’t you do it more often then?’ She sat down again; not wanting to stand taller than the queen.

With a sad look, she retorted, ‘I am not allowed, remember?’ and she thought about the times she had denied the Law Book and had gone out to be alone in the wild, even if it was for a few hours; she felt utterly happy and free.

‘You always have to bring a guard, even in your spare time?’

Artride nodded. ‘Not in the castle gardens of course, but as lovely as they are it is not the pure, untamed wild.’ And she feared the question that would definitely come from Tirsa:

‘What happens when you disobey; have you ever done that?’

She turned inward and closed her eyes, remembering the incredible pains that followed when she stayed away on her own long enough, as if calling her back. Without fail every time upon her return, she would be violently sick the following hours as punishment. The book always knew, always.

‘Oh yes,’ she remarked sadly, but also with a faint undertone of pride. ‘I often wander alone in the woods or mountains. The rule does not stop me from going, though. The longer I am away for; the more pain in response I receive, and once back, it is even worse. Nevertheless ... even the hurt cannot take away the happiness of those short moments of freedom I experience. It is worth it.’

‘You are punished too?’ Tirsa’s mouth hung open and she almost stood from her sitting position as if she was about to face an enemy. She stiffened in anger and coiled her fists.

Artride studied her face. 'Like I said; the power of the curse has no limits.'

Tirsa flopped down again and rubbed her hands nervously. Artride smiled warmly at the angry young woman and stood. 'Do not worry about me, Tirsa. It is nothing I cannot handle. Do not forget that I am fully responsible for my own actions. We all are actually. If we are all good citizens no harm is done really,' she said in a mocking voice. 'But then again everyone would have to know the Law by heart which is actually what I have been advising people to do. If only they would know the true reason behind this.' And she sighed. 'So, shall we continue our journey?'

I am glad she was sensible enough to bring me along this time.

They packed their things and left in search of the bridge. According to the map, it had to be close, but they spent a whole morning as they scouted along the river, and became a little worried. They still had not seen a single sign of anything closely resembling a bridge. Tirsa felt self-conscious and regretted the fact she had never made it as far west as this before. She felt as if she was of not much help. And Artride cursed the old woman who had drawn the map; for that certainly wasn't correct.

'We should have spotted it by now! I just don't understand.' Tirsa felt uneasy as well, but did her best to remain calm and uplifting.

They had travelled miles along the riverbank, following the small trail downstream and it was getting dark already. A complete day was lost in their search and both were upset and worried. Neither of them mentioned it, but both knew that the next day would already be the fourth day of Elimar's detainment, and they had only two and a half weeks to get back with a spell, or he would hang.

They were not even sure anymore whether they were going in the right direction, for if the map was not correct, the bridge could easily have

been upstream.

Tired and frustrated they made camp. They would have crossed the river if it was not so wide, deep and the current so strong. They really did need a bridge. After a few words, they agreed to go upstream the following day after a good night's sleep.

In the evening, at their hot simple dinner of vegetables, nuts and dried fruit, both were silent and did not speak much. They tried to be cheerful and not give up; for they were very much aware what was at stake.

The next day was sunny and bright. However, Artride had had a nightmare in the early morning hours and woke up sweaty and alarmed. Tirsa had enjoyed a dreamless deep sleep whilst normally she slept quite light; like a cat. Nevertheless, she grabbed her sword immediately when she heard the queen cry out, stumbling when getting up. However, when she realised the other woman had been dreaming, she stepped back.

'I dreamt they took you away,' Artride explained in a quavering voice.

'Who did?'

'I do not know. Horses, shadows ... hands pulling at you, dragging you away. I never felt so ... despaired and ... and ... lonely before ...'

Tirsa smiled when she realised the queen had dreamt about her! 'Well, I am not going anywhere, and I am a 'slayer', remember?' They exchanged looks and Artride smiled; but in a concerned sad way and her eyes did not glow.

Artride bathed herself in the cold river while Tirsa gave her some privacy and went for a short stroll nearby in the woods. When they reunited, she was silent all morning, as if she could not shake the dream off; it had been too real. Alarmingly, she once had a similar dream of her

father, the night before his death last year. The doctors said he died of a heart attack, but she knew it must have been the curse responsible. The curse appeared to be milder for kings than for queens. But presumably, her father had done something the curse did not agree with; for he was a strong and healthy man, but what? She never found out, and her father's counsellor seemed to keep it well hidden from her. Her father had never concealed anything from her. Unfortunately, it was not a written rule for a counsellor to share everything with a new queen if it was something that did not have to do with her new task and Ceartas. So whatever it was, it had had to be something else; something unpleasant. After her father passed away, his counsellor Gradolf, instead of becoming Artride's new counsellor, left to become the new counsellor of her uncle Volmer. Not that she minded it that much; she never liked either of them anyway. Volmer was also the Count of Morinthië – an important trading county of Razoras; a former enemy of Ceartas, but now an ally since their last war. Even though Artride was not sad to see him leave, she was left alone with her new task and alone with the book, the army, and her guards.

The queen and her bodyguard crossed their first camping place, which did not show traces of them at all; Tirsa had made sure of that, so only *they* knew they stayed there two nights before. Following the trail upstream, they strolled on.

And against all odds, in the afternoon of their third day of travel they finely found the bridge. It appeared to be made of stone and wood and looked truly ancient and ready to collapse any minute.

‘When we come back, I have to make sure to replace this one.’

Tirsa looked surprised at her. ‘Why? With all due respect, why would you encourage people using the bridge when it might not be safe in Dochas?’

‘Believe not the bad report till it be proved. And what if *I* want to come back?’ and she smiled mysteriously at the knight.

What does she think she will find there? Tirsa thought a little doubtfully. *A safe haven to escape to and never come back? Well, I couldn’t say I would blame her. It would be selfish, but what do I know about the life of a queen under the power of this horrid book? From what I heard so far it is a pretty helpless and painful task.*

They dismounted their horses and carefully crossed the long fragile bridge. When they did so, they both felt a cold breeze rushing along their skin, and dark clouds started to form.

‘What a sudden change of weather!’ Tirsa announced loudly, trying to make herself heard above the upcoming roar of wind that brought sand and even small twigs flying about. The sand stung their eyes and their clothes fluttered and pulled at their bodies. With some effort they finally managed to reach the other side; a dark wood. When Artride looked up, she noticed the sky had grown overcast. The clouds had darkened from the grey pale of granite to anomalous grey-black. It was a very foreboding sky.

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‘They are entering the Magical Land,’ a male voice hissed, displeased.

‘Precisely what I expected,’ another, more self-confident male voice remarked.

‘She is trying to get rid of the curse again. Hmm, she shows courage to go into Dochas with only one guard, but foolishness too. Come on, follow them.’

‘No, wait, Lord Volmer. Not too close. I have heard a lot about that young guard, Commander Lathabris; she might look like a girl, but she has as much field experience as both of us and is just as dangerous as she is charming. Even for us – my Lord.’

The big dark man glanced restlessly at his older grey companion, but he tempered, for he respected his wisdom. He was after all his counsellor. 'All right then, from a distance.'

~ ~ ~

The two women mounted their horses and rode into the mixed woods. The storm still raged, but the trees caught the wind mostly. Soon they left the wood and came across brownish-dark purple moors, with no tracks.

When they entered another wood with old oak trees, large pine trees and large ferns, the sky had grown even darker. Rain started to fall heavily, sooner than expected and they dismounted to find some shelter under a huge dense conifer tree. The horses stirred restlessly and appeared nervous. Meanwhile, the rain did not stop from sheeting down harshly, so after a couple of minutes they resolved to move on. Drenched from the rain soaking through their woollen tunics, and chilled to the bone, they continued on the now muddy trail, sticky with mud.

'I have to warm up and walk a little,' Artride announced idly and patted her horse. Tirsa could hardly see her face for her dark hood covered most of her features. The horses walked in front of them with their heads hanging low, their bodies shining wet.

Tirsa suddenly saw Fiosa stretch her ears backwards, what she did when she heard a sound from behind. The knight stopped for a moment, shoving her chain mail coif backwards to listen while the two horses and the queen walked steadily on. She squinted her eyes against the falling raindrops, and pierced her ears with her hair drained, close to her skull. She had discovered when you concentrated on your hearing you could actually hear more. Her shallow breathing created white plumes while she stood sensing for anything, and then when she was just turning around, in a flash of a moment she saw a face ... a man's white face. Rapidly she dug

but not before gazing at Artride, walking unaware, away from her. She had not noticed that Tirsa had stayed behind to listen, and there had not been time to tell her.

As fast as she could she began to run almost soundlessly, while staying as low as possible. She gave her trained horse the sign on the back so she would flee soundlessly. When she reached the queen, she launched herself against her back, hauling her to the ground towards the left, clutching her around her waist with one hand and with the other covering her mouth.

Together they landed on the wet mulch, halfway into the high ferns, which proved ideal for their hiding. Luckily, Artride's horse had run along with Fiosa; they had grown fond of each other and began to trust one another, so they were also hidden from sight.

Artride had landed on top of Tirsa who took the full blow of the fall on her back before rolling on. She stretched onto the queen's back now, still covering her mouth. Her hood had fallen off. *Is this a crime?* Tirsa wondered. Artride tried to make a comment, but found it impossible with Tirsa's hand firmly closed over her mouth. She twitched her head, staring with big eyes into the warning eyes of her companion. *Has she gone mad?* Was all Artride could think.

Her bodyguard pointed to their right, where she had seen the face, moving the two of them closer into the ferns which covered them completely now.

They heard the soft slow thudding of hooves coming their way through the open woods close to where the women lay hiding; right in front of them. *Two horses.* Artride dared not move.

The low voices were whispering and unmistakably male.

When they had passed Tirsa rolled off the queen's back, all the way excusing herself for her behaviour.

'No, you did the right thing,' Artride responded whispering; stretching onto her elbows, straining to look at the faces and just managing to recognise one of them before they vanished from view. She let herself roll on her back to the spongy forest floor and stayed frozen with wide-open eyes and a snow-white face. She covered her face with her muddy hands.

Tirsa resolved to see if they had really passed without noticing them, and worried about their horses, still ahead of the men. She sat down beside the queen whose mud-stained face was screwed up with horror.

'Do you know who they are, my Lady?' she asked unnecessarily. Tirsa tried to be casual.

Artride sighed and also sat up, still with tormented eyes, trying to dry and clean her wet muddy hands on her leather breeches, though failing at that mostly.

'Volmer; my uncle,' she softly murmured so that the other woman had to come closer to hear her.

'Who; your uncle?'

'I don't understand,' Artride added, ignoring or not hearing Tirsa's comment. 'How could he have followed us; we were so careful.'

'Why would he follow us?'

Artride stared at her with big fearful eyes and blinked a couple of times with her long black lashes flashing, as if she suddenly awoke to find herself in a nightmare. She looked totally drenched from the rain.

'I do not know. He could not have known we were heading for Dochas. No one knows.' Tirsa peered in the shadows and stared back at her. 'But you said your guards would take care of anyone following us.'

‘He is Royalty and must have talked his way through when the guards tried to stop him.’

‘And what about the other guy; his bodyguard?’

Artride shook her head beneath the hood in discomfort and bolted her hands into fists. ‘That must be Gradolf, his counsellor and protector.’ And she gestured in the direction their own horses had gone; not so far from where the two men had headed. ‘What about our horses?’

Tirsa grinned. ‘I taught Fiosa to come back after a while; she knows when it’s safe and will stay clear of them. I just hope your steed will follow her.’

‘But even a horse cannot know those men mean ill.’

Tirsa winked at her with one eye while she said, ‘Believe me, I taught her well; all men mean ill.’

Artride suddenly slapped her knee in frustration and softly cursed.

‘Why do you fear them so, my Lady; what harm can they do? It’s your uncle, family?’

Tirsa still did not quite get it; she could still be naïve and innocent even after all that she had been through, which appealed to Artride. To Tirsa, it was obvious that Artride was not pleased to see them, but she seemed more than upset.

She laughed. ‘I do not really fear them. I detest them to put it mildly. Volmer just makes it all very hard for me.’

‘How come? If I may ask?’

She tugged her hood closer at the nape of her neck for she was getting cold. ‘According to the book I have to marry before I turn thirty; in two years that is. It is the old story; my uncle always made it clear to my father and me, he wants his right to the throne. He finds it hard to fathom

that now my father is dead, his offspring instead of the brother, inherited Ceartas.'

She gazed up at the canopy of leaves above them, from where the rain poured on her face; closing her eyes she continued, 'I have the first right as a child of the firstborn, not the second born. When a first-born marries, the husband or wife inherits the throne. When they are both gone, the children do. He knows that. Father's counsellor betrayed my father when he went to my uncle to serve him. My uncle is a Count in Razoras; Morinthië, you see, and that position is not enough for him. He just does not let go of the thought to rule over Ceartas.'

'Razoras!' and she narrowed her eyes. 'And if he kills you, he will be king.'

'Yes, however, he won't do that for he knows about the curse and the curse won't let him get away with murder unpunished. Even if he had me murdered by an assassin, he would die too. He knows the rule, I am sure of it. That is the only rule I am glad about. However instead, he plans to marry me. He already asked me a couple of times,' she reflected in a hot voice.

Tirsa looked puzzled and speechless for a while. 'Marry you, but ... he is family, blood related!'

'In Razoras these things appear to be quite common,' and she added with a weary chuckle, 'what else would you expect?'

Tirsa had to think about this disturbing news and wiped her runny nose on her sleeve; facing away from the queen.

'And the curse ... or the book will allow this marriage?'

'Apparently it wasn't a crime in those days. I have to give my word to him before it will ever happen and obviously I won't.'

‘But why don’t you marry someone else instead? He can’t bother you then, can he?’ she asked silently.

‘I will,’ Artride said somewhat uncomfortably ‘But until now Volmer always stood in my way when I invite suitors into my castle. My undercover soldiers found out he bribes the young men with large sums of money and strange stories about me. I even have evidence of his soldiers wounding a couple of those who ignored the stories. Unfortunately, I can’t have him punished for that, nor can the book; for those things were also quite common in those days when the curse was born. Royal women were not really supposed to choose their partners themselves, but men on the other hand ...’

‘Who does he think he is?’ Tirsa coiled her fists in anger; her second nature by now.

‘Since all that I haven’t made much effort. I don’t want to endanger any more men.’ She hung her head low.

‘But what if they come unexpected?’ Artride resolved to look at Tirsa to see if she was serious and let out a small wheeze.

‘Unexpected? I do not think that word exists within the borders of Ceartas, nor my castle.’ And she turned her face away and pulled her heavy hood a little further over her forehead so her face was hidden. ‘Everything has to be planned; you of all people have found out yourself when you wanted to see me.’ Tirsa remembered that clear enough.

‘Well, they can only come by my invitation or when they ask me officially by letter. But I can’t seem to hide those things from Volmer; he always knows. Sometimes it is as if I have a spy in my castle. I really can’t trust anyone.’

Surely, a woman of her beauty must not find it too hard to find a lover out there ... Tirsa pondered. *Well, lovers surely, but a suitable*

husband is something else of course. He will most probably have to be approved by the book. I do feel sorry for the poor lad; not understanding what will bestow him fully until the queen can tell him after they are fully married. He himself will have a life in chains no doubt; golden as they may be, chains nevertheless. Also, you really have to have a heart of stone to endure the pain and grief of the powerless queen. And probably it's more like marrying the book than her. But didn't she mention the privileges Royal men have above women? She shook her thoughts off and narrowed her eyes. 'Perhaps that counsellor is to blame.'

'I deny Gradolf any excess to Tarac, but like I said; I don't trust many people of my household. There must be a spy.' Tirsia thought about Jaromir, the head of the queen's bodyguard.

'What about that bald guy, Jaromir?' she asked gingerly.

The queen smiled lightly. 'Jaromir is a good soul. He is always there when I need advice and looks after me and loves his country and his queen. But then again ... you can never tell, can you?'

And how can she trust me? I did not sign or vow anything ...

After a moment of listening to the rain falling on the leaves and the ground, Tirsia pointed out, 'And of course, Volmer followed you when he found out you were going to find a husband on your own. I don't want to be rude; but you had to see that coming.'

The queen licked her wet lips and reflected solemnly, 'I did, that is why I ordered my guards to stop *anyone* following us,' her jaw was set in a grim line.

'We don't know what truly happened.' Tirsia tried to comfort her, rubbing one knee, which hurt a little from the fall. 'Maybe you have been underestimating those two men.'

The queen did not comment, but had to admit to herself that Tirsa was most likely right. When she was sure her uncle could not kill or stop her from going, nor follow her, she thought she was safe and sound. What a fool she had been.

‘If they are clever enough,’ Tirsa pondered, getting up on her rather stiff legs again, reaching a hand out to Artride, helping her up, ‘they will come back looking for us. It looks like they have been following us from a small distance; so we’d better hurry and change course, before they trace us.’

And like Tirsa predicted; their trusty horses came back to them after a few moments. Artride could hardly believe her eyes.

They chose an alternative route through a dense wooded area, urging their horses off the trail and into the thick underbrush. And when the forest became of a more open nature, they let their horses gallop as fast as they could, hoof beats drumming.

The persistent drizzle in the air turned into a thin spray. Artride did not want to stop and look for shelter to finally warm themselves, which there clearly wasn’t. There were no caves or fallen trees big enough to cover two humans, let alone two horses in the open landscape. She wanted to get rid of any followers, and as far as the Magical Land was concerned; no magic had been noticed so far.

After a while, riding through a birch wood with some large old pines, and granite rocks scattered around like graves, they slowed to a trot, glancing around. Tirsa looked pensive.

‘What do you think? Did we shake them off?’ but Tirsa bit her lower lip as if she was not sure. There was a strange stir in the air.

‘I have this strange feeling I can’t place.’

Artride watched Tirsa on her right and studied her expression, which was almost unreadable.

‘Perhaps it is fear,’ she commented and observed her again; her head covered with her chain mail coif, a single string of wet hair withering in the wind, and her eyes big and darker green than Artride could remember. She felt melancholic just looking at her and a sudden sadness.

The air was thick with moisture and pushed heavily on Artride, who felt tired as well.

Suddenly the queen and her bodyguard felt a cold gust of wind blowing past them; it wavered along the huge pine trees towards some high prickly bushes.

If they had only looked in that direction; but it all happened so fast. Instantly an arrow whizzed and hit the black neck of Xaverius without so much of a sound. The horse reared up, pitching Artride backward. She barely managed to hold on to him, clutching at the reins. Xaverius let out a high terrifying scream, still staggering on his hind legs, then dropped slowly towards the floor when he felt himself weakening. He rolled his eyes, tossed his head and sank to the ground.

Tirsa jumped off her own horse and smacked her mount on the rear so she would run; after professionally grabbing her helmet, bow, arrows and shield from the saddlebag.

‘Take cover behind Xaverius!’ she shouted reaching over at Artride; glancing at the queen who tried to stop the bleeding of the poor animal with both her hands.

Tirsa noticed soon enough that the arrows did not try to hit the queen at all. They all shot past her in Tirsa’s direction alone. She jumped and steered away from Artride.

She kneeled down behind her shield; just big enough to cover her, with a swearing queen at her far right side. Tirsa had reached for her bow, and was loading, trying to figure out which way to shoot when suddenly the firing stopped.

At that moment, the head of the horse dropped motionless to the muddy floor. He had passed away. The two women exchanged upset glances as Artride tried to bite back her hot tears; she was too angry to cry.

The queen pulled a long dagger from one of her boots and got up angrily. Tirsa tried to stop her, reaching and pulling her sleeve, covering both of them with her shield. ‘No, don’t,’ and to the men, ‘Come on cowards, show your face!’ Tirsa yelped.

Not long after that, a man appeared from out of the undergrowth with a long bow in his hands. It was a tall man dressed in black and red; the colours of Razoras. Tirsa’s blood boiled at the sight of that, even though, of course, the war was long won.

‘Gradolf! You ... you!’ But Artride seemed to be totally at a loss for words and could not get any more out than that. Tirsa was not worried for the queen, because she had told her they wouldn’t kill her for their own sake. However, Tirsa had to move further away from her though, for the man was clearly aiming at her.

‘Lower your bow, now!’ Artride ordered him seeing he aimed at Tirsa, but he ignored her.

‘You call me a coward, missy?’ the man spoke in a hoarse voice. ‘You are the one who flees from her country and lies to her people. You think we believe you are looking for a husband,’ and he glimpsed theatrically around. ‘Here in Dochas?’

She narrowed her eyes in anger and said with a thin, pressed mouth, ‘You of all people ought to know why I am here; seeing my father

suffer for years. Where is your master, slave? I do not want to talk to a horse killer. And my name is Artride, Queen Artride, like I told you many times before.'

He took a few steps closer and she saw how old he had become in the two years she had not seen him. His hair was even greyer, his small beard looked thinner and his eyes sharper now he was close to victory, but just as vicious as ever. 'Your king will show himself once we get rid of your precious little bodyguard, now ... how shall I take her life; with this?' he aimed his bolted bow. 'Or this?' And he turned his chin toward his long two-handed sword at his side.

'Stop! You do nothing of that sort, and do not threaten us unless you want to start a war, and we all know how that ended last time. Stay right where you are or deal with me first, for I am not leaving her side.' Glancing at Tirsa, their eyes met briefly before they disengaged again.

'So all of a sudden you are *her* bodyguard?' he scowled, his eyes resting on Tirsa whose tightly, bolted longbow was not letting him out of its sight.

'You might as well be; she is of more value to Ceartas than you ever will be, missy.'

In a quick movement, Tirsa shot an arrow that pierced the ground just in front of his right foot.

'Drop your weapons and no one will get hurt,' she shouted at him, showing no fear of the old man. She strode towards him, away from Artride so she wouldn't get hurt in error. His right arm, which held the armed bow, shook a little as he shot back and missed. They confronted each other, little more than twenty feet apart..

He is old, he is no match for me, finish him! But she never killed unless there was no other choice. The man drew and notched a second

arrow, aimed and let fly. Tirsa jumped lightly to the side to avoid the arrow. She laughed, aimed and launched a second arrow. The arrow sang to its mark and he groaned in pain; reaching for his sword with his left hand he dropped the bow, but then ... another arrow flew passed Tirsa and unexpectedly hit Gradolf in his chest, sending him staggering.

Tirsa turned in surprise to see the shooter, as did Artride; but then she heard another arrow flying past Artride, hitting Tirsa deeply in the middle of her chest, dangerously near her heart. She let go of her bow instantly from the force of the blow and glanced down at the arrow as she sunk to the floor with a thud. Mud splattered up and smeared her back. As she struggled against the pain, rain sheeted into her open eyes and a dark stain spread rapidly across her wet surcoat, where the thick arrow was planted.

Artride watched this while the world seemed to stop spinning. Time itself just stopped.

From the corner of her eye she had seen it was Volmer who had shot the arrow. 'No!' she protested in a small voice, running towards the woman who was now stretched on her back on the grassy forest floor. She fell on her knees beside her. 'No!'

But it was no use; she wasn't breathing anymore and her helmeted head rested on the grass.

'No! Don't die, Tirsa ... don't ...' her voice cracked.

'Too late for that, my dear,' an uncomfortably calm voice behind her said. She pretended she did not hear, or maybe she really did not. She was too shocked to reason. Two hands tried to pull her away from her dead companion, but she refused to let that happen. She could not leave. She needed to see the life returning to those green eyes and hear that soft voice

talking to her. She reached out to touch her with her bloodstained hands, both from her horse and the woman, but she missed.

She was dragged away like a doll. Hands were dragging her away. Her dream ...

‘I didn’t know she meant that much to you, I am sorry for that,’ Volmer said grunting with effort, holding her by her waist. ‘But remember, I aimed for the heart, so she didn’t suffer.’ Now she did look at the man who was her uncle and she had a bitter taste in her mouth when she began, ‘What right ...!’ She panted heavily. ‘What right did anyone give you to take her life?’

He raised one eyebrow and opened his mouth; but before he could respond, she shouted, ‘What right?’ and punched him everywhere she could, and he fell, too surprised by her behaviour and her punches to his ribs, backwards. She jumped on top of him and continued to slap him hard in the face. His nose and mouth started bleeding and he tried to grip her hands to stop her.

He had a hard time in doing so, however he finally succeeded and threw her off, holding her wrists tight. She did not calm down and kept struggling, trying to kick him. He managed to raise his knife and placed its cool point on her wet throat. She calmed down a little, though still breathing heavily, eyes wide open.

‘I am sorry, my dear, but you left me no choice. I might not be allowed to take your useless life away unpunished; but the book doesn’t mention me taking your precious body as a crime.’ And she felt him caressing her throat with the tip of the knife down to her full breasts, his breath heavy with power and lust.

His broad face was pale, and his dark brown hair and moustache lay flat and stuck to his skull. He pulled her up with the knife closely set

against her despairing face and tear stung eyes. Still staring in disbelief at the motionless body of Tirsä, her gaze wandered off to that of Counsellor Gradolf and she was suddenly reminded of something. She looked straight in Volmer's eyes when she hissed, 'You may get away with killing your own counsellor, but you killed *my* only bodyguard. Do you think the book will let you live on unpunished with that?'

He showed an ugly grin, way too self-content for Artride's liking.

'You are forgetting one thing, my future bride; we are not in Ceartas right now.' Her heart seemed to stop when he said that. Why didn't she think of that herself? The curse reached only as far as the boundaries of Ceartas; although criminals committing a crime in Ceartas would be persecuted, it did not mean that Ceartasians could not commit crimes outside of Ceartas, unpunished. However Artride remembered one important exception to the rule:

'You will be punished when you return to claim my throne, because it's not just anyone you killed; it is the queen's bodyguard!' she called out and tried to struggle free. His grip on her tightened as he pulled her closer.

'Who says I will return?' he smiled wickedly. 'And who says *you* will?'

Artride shook her head. 'What do you mean? I thought you wanted to marry me for my country?' He gazed around and when he stared into her blue, tear stung eyes, again she saw a glimpse of remorse in his amber eyes. 'We can't return as you said wisely, so we will marry in Razoras; Morinthië, before the curse pulls you back.'

'Why for pity's sake?' she yelped ignoring the knife.

'You sound like Gradolf; he saw no good in it either. You see that is why I had to kill him. Only trouble he was, and for calling you 'missy',

which you obviously never liked. You are after all ... a lady.' And he smiled viciously, undressing her with his eyes.

'If you think I'm grateful, you're wrong, you filthy beast!' and she tried to wriggle her way out.

'He said I would not succeed in getting your word. I think, however, you will, if you ever want to return to your sweet home.' Volmer restrained her again, letting her feel the coldness of the blade.

Home? Do you think I feel at home back there? she thought wryly. *Oh, you do not know me at all!* But then she thought, *Or does he? He knows I have to return to see justice done. People are suffering and dying in Ceartas and he knows I feel responsible enough to do something about it. That is why we started this journey. Tirsa and I.*

Volmer added; seeing her bewildered gaze, trying to fight back the tears,

'When I marry the Queen of Ceartas; even in Razoras, it will make me King of Ceartas by law and all the laws I broke will be forgiven. After our marriage I can enter Ceartas freely again and have the castle and the land. I have studied the book well when visiting brother dear.'

She remembered how many rights Royal men had according to the book and knew he spoke the truth. He would have more rights than her. She closed her eyes in defeat.

'And why did you have to kill Tirsa, traitor?' she blurted out furiously. He stroked her face with the cold steel of the blade and she flinched a little. 'You have many names for me, my Lady, but you will come to call me Lord, in time.' And he seemed to gather his mind. 'What did you ask? Ah yes, the stout bodyguard, she was ... in our way. I will protect you from now on.'

‘And who is going to protect me from *you*?’ she retorted loudly, raising her voice.

His grin disappeared. ‘Very funny, Artride. I suppose you do not have to like me. But you will marry me if you ever want to do something about the book, which I know you do.’

‘As if you care!’

She pointed at the dark woods in the west; the direction of where the sorceress was supposed to live. ‘My only hope,’ she sounded bitterly, ‘lies there!’ and then her gaze wandered over to Tirsia a few feet away. ‘And *she* was my only way of getting there.’ Tears hindered her view. It was odd, but the rain had stopped, now to be replaced by the queen’s royal tears. She did not care anymore if he noticed her crying.

‘You confuse me, why do you say that?’

‘She is ... was special; she could have helped and now her brother ...’ And she stared straight into his dull eyes. Her mouth quavered along with her voice. ‘And you, you ... just took her life as you take the bodies of your helpless whores!’

‘Hold on there, love. No one is that special. I admit you mean a lot to me and not just to get hold of Ceartas, I see that now even more.’ And he sighed. ‘We can go together wherever you planned to go; if it makes you feel better.’ He waved with the knife in ignorance and at that instant she grabbed his wrist and kicked him hard in his crotch with her free foot, grabbing the knife. Volmer groaned with pain and fell to his knees, rolling himself into a ball.

She held the knife tightly in her right hand and pointed it firmly at him. He looked up with his face screwed in pain. ‘A real feminine way to treat a man, eh?’ he gasped.

‘Looks like you were there before, eh?’ she grinned with her eyes squeezed almost shut.

‘You don’t want to hurt me, you ... cannot.’ His face still looked self-confident. She kicked him in his cheek with her boot to remove that dirty smile from his face and he fell sideways, blood splashing from where she’d struck him..

He tried to rub the blood away and left a dirty trail, but as she watched, she did not feel anything. Her body and soul was full of revenge and she liked it. Now she understood what Tirsa must have felt when she killed the murderer of her father. *Is that what they call ‘sweet revenge’?*

‘We are not in Ceartas, remember,’ she pointed out and spat on him, pacing around him, looking down. ‘You and your ways disgust me. Money and power is all you care about.’

‘Don’t tell me you don’t like that, Artride. You of all people are craving more, and together — ’

‘Shut your face!’

He breathed heavily, but did not stop. ‘That’s your reason for wanting to get rid of the curse; your only true reason so you can make your own rules! To have control at last! But I understand —’ He tried to get up, but she kicked his weakened body to the forest floor again. She knew ways to disarm men; she had had lessons as well.

Her head was clear now and although her hands trembled, she felt incredibly numb.

‘Do not talk to me like you know me,’ she sounded icily.

In a rapid moment, she felt a hand grabbing her ankle and she was pulled off balance. Volmer was on top of her and trying to strangle her with his big hands; however, she was still holding the knife. Without thinking, she stabbed him firmly in the back, and his face turned red from

anger and pain. The blade was not that long, nevertheless it did enough damage to loosen his grip a little. He tried to reach it, but she was quicker and pulled it out in one rapid movement, only to stab him fully in the belly this time.

His stare was full of disbelief when he looked at her and at the knife planted deeply in his gut. The blood started seeping out abundantly, and when he gazed up at her, his eyelids became weary.

‘Oops, it seems like I didn’t aim for the heart!’ she said cynically and slid from underneath him, trying to get away from his heavy body and the blood in disgust.

He opened his mouth to say something, but blood seeped out and his pupils turned small from pain. He reached for her but the next moment dropped dead to the floor. The only sound she heard was, ‘Punishhhhhhhhhh.’

Hastily she got up, staring at the sky above her whispering, ‘Forgive me Father.’ And then left the scene to walk over to the lifeless body of Tirsia Lathabris.

CHAPTER 5

GONE

*She is gone and my heart can bleed no more
I am as a shell with no living thing within
I am as one demented, lost in a shadowed world.*

Celtic poem

She had never taken a life before; and in another situation she would have been appalled. But now, other than shaking uncontrollably, her feelings were overcome with grief and anger.

Drained, bloody and muddy, Artride fell down on her knees next to the motionless body of her companion. She looked asleep and at peace, stretched out on her back, but with her eyes wide-open and emerald green, like gems. But there was no one home anymore. Only the arrow sticking out of her chest looked out of place. Her broken chain mail hadn't protected her at all. Tirsa lay in a pool of her own darkened blood.

It was wrong, all wrong.

She moved her shaky hand to touch the shaft, closing her fingers around the feathers, squeezing her eyes shut, and pulling it out with one quick pull. Without looking she fiercely threw it away.

When opening her eyes she stared at the bloody wound, which left her gasping for air. For a moment Artride thought Tirsa was still alive, because blood was running out slowly; but she quickly realised the blood was just leaving the body. She placed her hands on the wound, trying to cover it; trying to keep the blood inside in a vain attempt to still save her.

Tears rolled down her dirty cheeks when she realised it was futile. She stretched her hand out to remove the helmet and caressed her blond

wet hair, remembering how the sun had shone on it and how the wind used to play with the loose strands.

‘No, it cannot be over. No ...’ *It didn’t even begin.* And she grabbed the dead knight’s upper body and held her tight; rocking her like a baby, her limp head had fallen down against her chest. She screamed uncontrollably and wept.

After a few moments she cried, ‘It is all my fault. I should never have asked you to come along with me. I should have listened to you; you were right about people following us and it not being safe, and the chance of reaching Dochas unhurt small. And I should have taken better precautions against those two mad men. You would still be alive then. I am so sorry Tirsa ... so sorry.’ And new tears appeared in her eyes; mixing with the blood, rain and dirt on her face.

After some time, she laid her back carefully and kneeling next to her jammed at her own running eyes. She wouldn’t let go ... couldn’t.

A single beam of sunlight shone across the floor, breaking through the evaporating clouds, sparkling on the wet mulch and needles scattered about, but Artride didn’t notice. More clouds left and more sunlight managed to get through, bathing the trees, plants and rocks in its heavenly warmth. Sunlight shone on her quavering back and long wet braid of black hair; but she didn’t feel it.

One sunbeam, however, moved across Tirsa’s body, moving back and forth. That got her attention. The beam of light seemed to explore the body. Artride blinked her eyes and looked again.

Just above the body appeared a bright pure white light and Artride stared in amazement at it. The light seemed to transform into a figure; a transparent white woman with hair so long that Artride thought she was dressed with those strands. But when she looked closer she saw it was a

long white dress covering her tranquil figure. The fine-looking woman stepped lightly between Tirsa's body and Artride.

‘Hello Lady Artride,’ a calm, pleasant voice announced.

She was too stunned to respond – even to ask how she knew her name, and remained seated.

‘I am sorry to frighten you. I am here to help.’

She glanced back at lifeless Tirsa, not wanting to be disturbed really; not even by a white divine woman. ‘Are you an angel of death coming to take Tirsa? How is that helping me?’ she asked bluntly. The woman smiled a sad smile. ‘No, my dear lady. That would do you no good. Usually when I speak of help, I mean help.’ And she came a little closer. Artride shook her head, bewildered. ‘How?’ her voice cracked.

‘I represent life and death, and I am a guide between the worlds. Only those who are just born and those who pass away know who I am. Well, here in Dochas that is. Out there you probably have a different delegation. They call me a goddess and I think that should honour me. But mostly gods represent certain aspects in life; things that need an explanation in the mind of higher creatures. Gods; except for the Higher Spirit, are created to guide and to be worshipped and bring steadiness into people's lives. I am not created, however, although many cultures worship us guides, more or less. I merely exist, whether people believe in me or not, and am therefore as real as you are. Except that my body is of a different substance; but do not let that disturb you.’

Artride tried to think about her words, but they confused her; she couldn't seem to think clearly. The woman noticed and added concerned, ‘All you need to know right now is that I can help you.’

‘Help me? I do not need help. If you were here earlier ... but now ... now is too late. Not even my healing skills could have brought her

back. She is gone.’ Her throat felt thick as her eyes rested on Tirsa’s body again, and she continued weeping.

The woman laid an emphatic hand, which felt strangely real, on her shoulder.

‘You care about her,’ she said with feeling. Her eyes were dark pools, but clear like a moonlit night sky and her body seemed to glow from within.

‘A ... lot.’ Only, she wished she had said that to her while she was still alive.

‘Your soul is pure and good, but troubled, torn and weary from secrecy and immobility.’

Artride didn’t dare to meet her strange eyes again. *It’s like she is reading my soul.*

‘I just have to ask you one thing, in order to try and bring her back.’

Now she did look up. ‘Bring her back? Is that possible?’

‘You are in Dochas, my dear. Almost anything is possible here as long as you believe in it. Remember that.’

‘I forgot.’ She swallowed hard. ‘Even with this wound?’

‘In your world it would not be possible, no. Here it is a different matter.’

‘Magic?’ as she remembered she was indeed in the Magical Land now.

The woman nodded.

Hope returned into the queen’s heart and silent tears rolled down her cheek, falling on the wet grass.

‘Can I help?’ she sniffed. ‘I would give anything to bring her back.’

‘I believe you.’ And she stared at length at the body of Tirsa and sighed. ‘Because I haven’t known her from the day of her birth, for she was not born here and I am after all the Guide of Dochas, it might prove to be complicated. However, not impossible. Can you tell me a little bit about her; what she is like; her past, her personality, her dreams, hopes, anxieties, passions. I have to know to be able to find her door and pathway, in order to bring her back.’

Artride blinked a couple of times and swallowed hard before she started to tell all she knew about Tirsa Lathabris, and what she had learned during their short time together. She had to trust her.

‘That should be enough, but Artride, I have to be honest with you ... it might not work. It is possible she has found her peace and does not want to come back.’

‘Why would she not want to come back?’ That did not make any sense to her.

The white woman only stared at her and didn’t reply. In her heart Artride had some idea.

‘She loves Talamh, she loves life!’

‘I shall do my best, Artride. That is all I can do, my very best. I know what’s at stake.’

~ ~ ~

It all had happened so quickly. Was she down? What was this terrible pain exploding from within her chest; numbing her, weakening her?

She felt so heavy. Why did everything around her suddenly turn so small and meaningless?

Tirsa felt herself rise, being lifted by an unknown force. She looked down upon a body covered in blood, with an arrow sticking out of its chest. It took her some time to comprehend she recognised it; it was her

own lifeless body. But it did not matter. It was as if she had voluntarily joined the warmth around her; more comfortable than any warmth she had ever felt before. And she felt free; free from pain and darkness. She was lying in her mother's arms; singing to her. She felt so loved and safe. Next, she was listening to her beautiful fairy tales and she was feeling so grateful. The next moment she was strolling on the moors with both her parents and sister; listening to her making up her own stories; truly listened at and cared for. She played the pebble game with her sister and together they laughed. As she had both laughed and cried the day her brother was born; he looked so fragile and helpless. She felt so much love radiating from her family; a feeling she had almost forgotten. She was not alone.

Then she was floating ...There was a light; brighter than the sun, but less painful when you looked straight into it. She was bathing in this light that seemed to heal her wounded spirit. It felt so good. And all was more vivid than any dream she had had before.

The light she dwelled in appeared to contain many colours. Colours so marvellous, almost too much for her comprehension; mixing and blending, growing and fading; circles of a pastel yellow turning in a warm energetic orange; a deep violet purple surrounded by soothing blue shades, and the green shades were such a comfortable green. She immediately felt at home.

She breathed in so much peace and love, trust and strength; she forgot all about her worries, fears, anything connected to her past or her future. There was only here and now. No thoughts, memories about any darkness any more.

The green dissolved with the other colours and made way for a dark turquoise tunnel; she instinctively knew she had to follow. Somehow

it all seemed familiar.

She easily flowed into the tunnel that gently guided her forward to the brighter light; which seemed to be the source of it all.

Returning home finally – something she longed for her whole life.

Slowly she began to notice vague figures like smoke aside of her; staring at her, all smiling with such warmth and love. She could not recognise the faces at the beginning of the tunnel, but when she came closer to the light, she began to finally see faces that were somehow familiar. People she knew were her long lost friends and relatives, grandparents, aunts, people who looked vaguely like her mother, her father ... but mostly persons she had never personally met.

But then gradually she came across an endless, lovely hilly meadow, with thousands of colourful flowers spread about, and countless beautiful butterflies. Ultimate happiness filled her soul when she breathed in the scenery. The air was sweet with a flower scent like jasmine.

The road seemed to end and more people dwelled here; smiling at her, opening their arms for her. Among soldier friends who had died during battle, she recognised a bright one who came walking, or rather floating, towards her. She knew instinctively the kind features of her father; exactly how he had looked, only better and brighter. Shining so bright like a star, so that she almost couldn't see his features. She remembered her happy times with him, and his brutal murder included. Even her revenge had not taken away the pain. *Dead, he was dead!*

She felt herself jump both from joy and grief and a sudden realisation that this all could not be a dream after all: she had never dreamt so vividly about him before. It had to be the Afterlife and all those people souls who had died. *But they seem so alive ...* Why had she not trusted what she knew?

‘Daddy?’ she called out and he just nodded at her, but didn’t come close. *Why not?*

He pointed silently at her tunnel still behind her; somehow she thought it would close after her. It remained open though, as if it was waiting for her. *Why?*

And then in answer she saw his face turning, and she followed his gaze, which rested on her lost friend and lover Mabel. At this sight she cried out; but her voice sounded more like a melody than her voice, and the place where her heart had been felt warm and overflowing with love.

She looked just like she remembered her, only a little vaguer and more transparent; her ebony half-long hair waving around her on the soft breeze, her round face, with a few freckles on her nose and rosy cheeks, her impudent pink mouth and her vivid amber eyes sparkling with love and recognition. Only the knight’s clothes she wore brought Tirsa brutally back to the day of her cruel death. That all seemed so awfully long ago; and she remembered that pain all too well; and now that Mabel was standing right in front of her; intact and smiling without a care in the world, Tirsa didn’t understand how she ever could have dealt with the separation death had caused. But it did not matter now, that was over. She was back.

My love, so soon? It even sounded like her voice too, and her voice was the only sound she could hear.

They hugged each other closely, holding one another tightly; only to part to look at the other again.

Tirsa would have wept if she had eyes to cry with, but now that she was all soul, all eyes and ears, she glowed all over, feeling so much – as well as pain in her soul. But without the body having to deal with all those raging emotions, it felt very odd indeed. To look in her eyes again was all

Tirsa had ever wanted, and now that she had her back she would never leave. Mabel sensed that and took her hand daintily in hers. It felt strangely warm; nothing like the cold hand she had felt when she passed away, and somehow thought she still would have felt. *Don't think about that.* Mabel had spoken, but without opening her mouth.

‘How can I not? I saw you die. You’re dead.’

Do I look dead to you?

Tirsa smiled at her and she glimpsed at her own hands, feet and legs, just how they looked like when she was alive; not much vaguer and she wondered ...

It gets hazier the longer you are here.

‘Like my dad ...’

Yes, but do not worry, we never fade away. Mabel spoke to reinsure her with a giggle she was used to. *We still have the image of our last body, that housed us; only to return to a new one later on. Then we, our souls, take on that new shape.*

Tirsa gazed around at the meadow, so lovely and so familiar.

This is our meadow ...

How could she ever have forgotten?

That is necessary, Tirs. If we would remember this place completely; we would forget about our tasks on Talamh; always longing to go back.

‘But I have somehow ...’ she found herself saying. ‘I have been here before haven’t I?’

Oh, yes. You have been here many times, like I have. Death is not the end. It is merely another phase in life; a stop in between. This place is a place to recover and to reflect on the life you have lived. A place to learn, before you go to another field. There is no death; not like most

people think. We don't stay here though. Everyone, your true self, returns to the mundane world; Talamh, our mother. Over and over again; life after life, always changing and bettering ourselves. We are immortal Tirsa, like you always wanted, like your Windchildren.

... Come back, Tirsa, you have got to come back. A voice interrupted softly.

Tirsa stared confused into Mabel's eyes; but it wasn't her voice she had heard, in a singing fashion.

It looks like you have something to complete.

'But I just got here!'

Now you know I am never ever far away; distance does not exist here. Remember that and you will deal with the natural course of life better.

Tirsa tried to recall why she was suppose to go back. Nothing came to her; only her life with Mabel, as if all the rest was meaningless.

'I tried to be strong, Mabel, but it was so hard living without you; dealing with all the fearful things around me, that didn't seem to matter when you were there. The emptiness in my heart ... Now that I've found you; I won't let you go again, not again.'

Mabel looked frightened and Tirsa didn't fathom, shaking her head.

It was my time, Tirsa. My tasks were completed, my life fulfilled. I had to go.

'You were killed by a soldier in a war! It was not a choice.'

It was my destiny. And therefore also linked to yours.

'What about us and who decides that anyway?'

I've never left your side. I have been watching you. You were starting to do better; ready to live again.

Tirsa remembered what had made her want to live again. *Elimar ...* and suddenly she found herself back in the blue tunnel.

‘No, please let me stay with her!’ she panicked.

You are too early, Tirs. I’ve missed you terribly, but I have been trying to comfort you. Trying to stop you that moment you ... She paused for a moment. Yes, Tirsa remembered her suicide attempt all too clearly. It nearly cost her her job as well; not that she would have cared at the time. And now nothing mattered at all, or did it?

It would have been selfish to let it happen; all to have you with me again, but I was never far away. Time and space really do not exist between the worlds, once you comprehend that ... Her voice sounded soothing. Another knight had come in her room that day, and prevented her just in time from slicing her wrists. Mabel had sent that knight; a living angel.

‘I often had a feeling ... I felt your presence.’

Yes, I was there ...

... Come back Tirsa. Come back to us. It sounded very persuading now.

‘Who is that?’ she asked confused, but Mabel didn’t answer to her direct question, only said:

You were the only one I’ve ever loved, and I don’t think anyone ever loved me more than you did. With you I laughed and cried. Nothing could part us, but death ... It was hard for me to accept that I couldn’t go back physically. Oh, how I wanted to! Mabel sounded angry and her shape quivered. Life is our goal, Tirs, not death! Never forget that. I didn’t have enough time to do everything I wanted, but you have. Use it well. We have to accept the fact I am here and you’re there. One day we will be together again. You’ll have to let go of me though ... Remember me before our

separation; cherish those memories, but let me go. Now, you must go back; listen to that voice, follow it ... They need you and you need them. Your chance is not over. Live your life. Time is precious. We will meet again, love, and until then ... know that I will never forget you, ever ...

Tirsa felt reluctant to leave; it was so placid here, but Mabel was fine ... while she had let herself wander in darkness, refusing to live, hiding in her pain, regret, guilt, refusing to go on, missing Mabel terribly; all the while Mabel was not really gone. She could have known; she had felt her, but she had been afraid; afraid to live without her and to rely on herself again perhaps; having no love and goal anymore. And now she had reminded her about her life on Talamh; a life Mabel had lost regretfully, but one Tirsa could have again. The green, luscious planet with all its creatures she loved so much and her life she had almost forgotten; harsh and mean as it could be, but also beautiful and full of wonderment. Where this world was perhaps only a shadow of – or the other way around.

She had no special desire to go back, however, Mabel was the proof of her former life. She understood everything she had said and didn't question her; for a sense of all knowing suddenly overtook her.

'Life is not the same without you, Mabel, and it never will be. There is this emptiness—'

But you mustn't throw your life away either. You have so much to offer; your love to give. You must let go of me; otherwise we both cannot go on. Follow your heart, Tirs, and love will find you again. For love is the most important thing in our lives; to give and receive, that is one of the things I have learned. Without love no one will survive, including you. There are many who need you; more than you know.

'I could stay with you, couldn't I?'

Yes, if you desire so.

‘But I could go back as well ...’

If there is still time. But she nodded.

They embraced; soul to soul, pure and all-knowing. ‘Elimar needs my help and ... my queen, if it’s not too late.’ She clearly remembered Artride now and felt a warmth around her heart.

Mabel smiled warmly at her, nodding in approval. *Then hurry Tirs; before your blood turns thick and your body too cold to return to. Hurry ... I will be here waiting for you always ...*

Now that she gave in on the thought to go back, she felt that she was pulled quickly backwards through the light blue tunnel. ‘I love you, Mabel!’ *I love you.* Her voice sounded pleasant, but her image dissolved in the distance, becoming smaller and smaller.

Watch out for ... the woman of stone – was the last thing she heard her say; before she started to fall with an enormous speed, making her dizzy. The beautiful colours faded and it became darker and darker ... And then she came down and landed most painfully.

She could feel pain again; all over, and cold. So much feeling and so overwhelming, she felt nauseous. Her soul had fallen back harshly into her body; head first, feet last. She was back. Back in the darkness ...

CHAPTER 6

REAWAKENING

*There is no greater force than love,
And no greater quality than truth*
Gaelic pronoun

A heartbeat ... blood being pumped persistently through veins; like a single stream after rainfall. Then silence. Another heartbeat, more rushing blood finding its way again, and a silence and then another, quicker rhythm and another, now more steady. The drum of life. Fresh blood rushing through veins, nourishing the organs, bringing them back to life. A sharp burning like a flame in her chest. Lungs wanting to be filled with air.

Suddenly a gasping sound; breathing? Trying to breath; filling lungs with cold moist air – holding it, letting go, drawing more in and breathing out only to gasp for more. Tirsa never knew it could be so difficult; so measured and so ... painful.

Coldness; frozen stiff arms and legs. Shaking, pins and needles; awakening tingling limbs, realising who she was and where, with closed eyes.

She felt a light pressure on her lips; a soft kiss, whispering. ‘Tirsa, please.’ It sounded familiar, but it wasn’t the same voice she had heard moments ago; only moments ago ... back there, where? She tried to think, but her head felt so heavy. And the cold and the thirst so overpowering.

Her stiff muscles strained themselves and her whole body started to shiver and shake violently, uncontrollable; like a spasm.

Artride was so shocked and overwhelmed to see movement in Tirsa again; she wanted to cry out, but quickly covered her mouth, her eyes wide

open.

As quick as the shaking had come it had disappeared again; and Tirsa lay motionless again, yet silently breathing.

‘Tirsa?’ the queen’s quavering voice muttered and squeezed her hand to get a reaction; she removed the blanket she had placed on top of her from one of her saddlebags. Touching her chest she tried to feel for life inside. It slowly rose up and down, hopefully.

Artride started to weep out of pure joy and bit her knuckles to feel she wasn’t dreaming.

‘You’re alive! By the gods; alive!’

Tirsa heard her and tried to lift her heavy eyelids. She heard very clearly now; better than she ever did before, overwhelming her; the wind rushing through the leaves overhead and through the bushes, the grass. When she opened her eyes, she saw the splendour of bright sunlight on the fresh green canopy above her; the patterns of the leaves dancing carelessly in the tender movement of the wind. Greyish pink clouds were passing by and she smelled the scent of wet grass, mulch and leaves mixed with rain and ... blood; death.

She remembered. She was one with all life now, truly. She knew her world was different from now on and would never be the same again.

She noticed a face staring at her patiently. The concerned face of Artride, blood and dirt stained.

‘My ... Lady?’

The queen laughed and cried through her tears; covering her mouth, with such pure joy that Tirsa almost did not recognize her. It was a side of her until now unseen.

The colour was back on Tirsa’s face and the light in her eyes had returned, sparkling from within. It had been true; that white woman had

not been lying and she actually succeeded. Artride realised this was probably the best moment in her entire life.

She softly embraced her companion. 'Tirsa.'

Tirsa returned the gesture at last by putting her arms around the queen's neck.

'Volmer?' she asked with a dry throat. She felt Artride hug her closer and there was no worry in her voice when she announced, 'He is gone.'

Tirsa nodded and thought about the word 'gone', for she knew now that there was no such thing as 'gone'.

'How?'

Artride let go of her and smiled faintly, 'In self-defence.'

She nodded slowly and returned her smile, a little worried. 'I am glad he didn't get you,' and felt a wave of guilt when she thought about wanting to stay in the Afterworld. 'I failed in protecting you.'

Artride's smile faded. 'No, don't say that, Tirsa.'

'He could have killed you.'

'But he did not. You were the target, I was his aim. He wanted me alive, but you had to be killed.'

Artride's tear-stung eyes examined her all over and rested at her torn bloody surcoat. She plucked on the broken chain mail and touched the healed skin between her breasts. The wound was closed without so much as a scar and only the blood was a silent reminder of the past hour.

'There are no words to express how glad I am you are back, Tirsa.'

Tirsa smiled lightly and wiped the tears from the other woman's face with one hand, noticing the bloodstains on her cheek and touching the dried blood questionably.

‘That is yours, not mine. Look.’ And she pointed at the hole in her clothes. ‘That’s where you have been hit. I had to pull the arrow out.’ Drowsily she glanced from the hole in her surcoat to the queen.

‘But there is no wound?’

‘It’s healed and it was not my doing this time.’

Tirsa couldn’t fathom it. It just wasn’t natural.

‘You were dead, Tirsa and beyond my powers. A white lady who said she was some sort of guide called you back. I do not now how, but all I care about is that you’re back.’ And she glimpsed thoughtfully around. ‘I never even had a chance to thank her. I presume we shan’t be seeing her anymore.’ And looking at Tirsa she added, ‘But you must be exhausted, can you stand?’

Artride helped her up. Tirsa struggled, feeling weary and trembling on her legs. She saw the dead bodies of Gradolf nearby and that of Volmer further away. The air already stank of death.

Together they left the awful scenery, Tirsa leaning ashamedly on the queen for help, walking past the lifeless body of the faithful mount, Xaverius. Artride started to remove the saddlebags with her things and said goodbye. She hated to leave him there, but promised his soul to come back and give him a proper funeral.

‘He has no pain anymore,’ Tirsa muttered and Artride had to swallow a knot away.

They walked about half a mile more before they found Tirsa’s mare, Fiosa; as if she was waiting.

‘Amazing.’ Artride sighed and watched Tirsa approach her horse carefully. Fiosa had her ears pricked backwards from fear. Clearly Tirsa stunk of death, but there was love in her brown eyes and when she rubbed her nose, softly muttering, the mare relaxed.

Nearby they made camp in the cover of a dense pinewood, both feeling completely depleted.

~ ~ ~

‘Do you ... want to talk about it?’ Artride gingerly tried.

Tirsa had been unable to sleep or eat after the recent events, having too much to ponder about and as a result sat staring into the air. Artride had built a simple hut of branches and leaves against the returning rain and left her at peace. It was in the midst of night and she had tried to sleep, however she could not deal with the continuing silence. Even though Tirsa was back among the living, she wasn’t really present.

Artride respected her too much to interfere, but thought she might want help dealing with whatever was bothering her.

The blonde woman was wrapped in her blanket trying to get warm and looked tired and confused. The simple hut was leaking here and there, and the only sound was that of the falling of raindrops, intermittently through the leaves and needles, on the forest floor, branches, grass and mulch of their hut.

Slowly she nodded as Artride shuffled a little closer to be able to hear her above the sound of the rain. It was almost completely dark, but the sound of her voice and her words were all the queen needed at the moment; some proof of her existence. She laid a comforting hand on her knee, which startled Tirsa and shook her up a little. Her heart was thumping against her chest. No pain anymore; however, so exhausted, like she never had been before. Artride heard her drawing a deep breath.

‘I ... never knew what would happen when we die.’ She began with an unsteady voice. ‘I thought about it a lot, who doesn’t? But then again when the final moment comes ... let’s say I wasn’t disappointed. Although I have no idea if this happens to everyone. All I know is that what I

experienced was lovely and peaceful, like I became a part of contentment itself.’ Her eyes glowed like stars in the dark when she remembered the sceneries and her voice was full of excitement, like never before.

‘The colours were brighter, the soft sounds like harmonious ... music, the people I loved ... so thoughtful and kind; full of understanding.’

‘You saw people?’

‘Yes and they are all right.’ And she laughed to the surprise of Artride. She waited for Tirsa to continue, but the young woman sighed when she thought about it and after a short moment resumed, ‘It’s hard to explain in words, but when I was there I seemed to understand everything and everyone. I was ... one.’

There was remorse in her voice as she talked, so much that Artride almost felt guilty and selfish she had wanted her back. It sounded like she had already been happy there in that short moment of her death. Nevertheless, the white woman had made it clear Tirsa had to really *want* to return, in order to come back, like she did.

Tirsa somehow sensed it and added more softly, ‘They made it clear to me I wasn’t supposed to be there yet; my tasks are not over, but that one day I will return. Knowing that comforts me greatly.’

‘I want you to know how glad I am you came back, Tirsa. I really am,’ Artride sounded near to tears.

‘I know and I am grateful too. I have treated life and myself badly. That will change from now on. Almost every day I face death, but I feel that in order to really fathom life we have to die. Sometimes a little.’

She sounded different; calmer, wiser and enlightened.

‘There was this voice calling me back, and I was torn between two worlds for a moment, but in my heart I knew what I had to do. This voice;

could she be what you called the White Lady?’

‘I think so. She suddenly appeared when you lay lifeless, and offered to help. She said she couldn’t have done the same in our country, but here in the Magical Land everything seems possible.’

‘I hope she is right when it comes down to a counter spell for the curse as well.’

Artride knew what she meant and asked, ‘But could it also mean there is no death here?’

‘I don’t think so, I do not know why I was saved and if that would happen every time. Ultimately death is unavoidable, even here, eventually; but I feel we don’t have to fear it so much. In any case we mustn’t fear death back in Ceartas either, for even though death is always near, it is not something we have to be frightened of. It’s an essential part of life, a next phase. When we live in fear ... we don’t really live.’

‘I have never feared death really; it’s just that it would be such a waste to lose it all, and especially now. Is that the reason you returned?’
Could that be true?

She heard Tirsa move her blanket.

‘I realised there was something important to go back for, yes. I couldn’t have helped Elimar, or you otherwise.’

After a short silence Artride kindly spoke, ‘Try to get some sleep, Tirsa.’ However, she noticed that her eyes had closed already and she was drifting off.

~ ~ ~

It was the silent moment of the early morning hours, when the land is caught between a light sleep and awakening. The air was still swollen with the scents of the night, the pine trees and the rain. Inside the hut where the

women lay asleep it was dry, apart from a few moist needles on the ground where the roof had leaked.

Tirsa opened her eyes to stare at the familiar sight of dark tree trunks. The sight of trees had always comforted her in every season; their soothing constant beings, old and wise, never judging. Now that she had some sleep, she remembered everything that happened, and laid thinking about the recent events, and Mabel, until she had to move her stiff limbs to avoid a cramp in her hip. Could she ever let her go truly? She was her first love after all. And could she love again? Before this happened it had never even crossed her mind.

When she turned over, she realised the warmth she had felt at her back was that of Artride clinging closely to her.

What a failure I am; to be nurtured by the queen over and over again! But then she thought about the Sisters of the Sword; a group of fierce mercenaries in Zoria, always travelling in couples, pledged to protect and help each other during battles. They lend their bodies and souls for that goal. *How can I even compare us with them! I am a warrior all right; but Artride is still a queen, a lady and I am supposed to be **her** bodyguard! And what a mistake it has proven!*

And then suddenly, like a flash of lightning, she remembered the words spoken by Mabel, *Look out for the woman of stone ...* What and who did she mean by that; Artride? She wasn't made of stone; she had seen her cry. But who then?

Puzzled, she stood up, not wanting to wake her, and gathered her damp clothes to put them on again over her sleeveless shirt; the only garniture which had remained dry in the protection of the saddlebag. She didn't bring an extra uniform; therefore the wet, mud and blood stained tunic had to do for now, until she could wash it in a river or lake. She

examined the mail skirt closely and came to the conclusion she could not mend it right now; she lacked the tools to repair the broken metal rings. *It didn't do me much good anyway.* The hole was not that big; only a couple of rings were scattered, but she felt reluctant to put the heavy thing on again. Foolish or not, she put it away in her bag.

When she glimpsed at the serene face of the queen, she felt even worse. She had to kill her own freaking uncle because I was shot down! And now ... who knows what will happen when she returns to Ceartas without a counter spell for the curse for killing him. Most likely she will be punished, even if she is the Queen of Ceartas! If she is not even allowed to travel without a guard unpunished, what will the penalty be for murder, even if it was in self-defence! And she remembered that she had mentioned no one ever got a trial when breaking a law; there was always a penalty and the queen would be no exception.

Murder meant death, period. *Gods no.*

Now you know what you have to do ... a voice spoke in her head, her own or ... Mabel's? She wasn't sure, but yes, one thing she knew: there was no turning back without a spell, or not only her brother would die but her queen as well, and with her death the hope of a decent future for Ceartas would certainly be lost.

Absentmindedly she went outside to tend to her mare Fiosa and prepare breakfast. When she stared in those big brown mirrors of eyes she saw herself reflected; her blonde hair fussed and tangled. She started to brush her hair and then tug it into one hightail at the back of her head. She could not get rid of the taste of blood, however, and she wondered if everything in her body was properly healed. Well, she reckoned, for she didn't feel any pain other than morning stiffness and her rumbling stomach.

It was a clear brisk morning and dusk drew in. The first signs of the rising sun appeared; a marvellous yellow and bright pink glow illuminated the slow drifting clouds. It was almost a leftover of what she had seen. She had had spiritual moments like this before; usually sunrise or sunset does something to a person and you feel one and there is no room for thoughts.

And she remembered the feeling she had felt on the other side; it had been a similar experience. She took a deep breath; it felt exquisite.

This is life, my destiny. And she thought about the things she had learned in the Afterworld; not so different from what she initially had known when she was a child. Before the confusion started. From now on she promised she would embrace life again. Now that she knew her father was still there, and Mabel, and not gone or lost; only clouded from her view for a little while longer, but present somewhere ...

We will meet again, love ... She looked at the fierce red sun showing itself above the treetops and the clouds. *Is that where souls live?* She regained strength and courage, if not for herself, then for her brother and the queen. *Others need my help and I won't fail again. We cannot afford that.*

The queen noticed soon that her bodyguard had gone outside and joined her shortly after. They spoke softly and both avoided the past events' issues. What was there to say? She surely had a lot more to tell, and Artride was curious; but remained composed. *The shock of the experience might still come.*

Tirsa found it kind and began to respect the queen more with every day for her ways, trying to forget the vague rest. She still didn't know if she was completely honest with her, but then again why would she be? Tirsa was just her bodyguard and a queen didn't need to explain everything to her. She had just hoped she would have told her about this uncle and his

bodyguard, and well ... no she should have been on her guard anyway; protecting the life of her queen, so it would not have made much difference. Maybe she had already said more than she had to anyone, and Tirsa should feel honoured for that fact alone. But still ...

A bodyguard wasn't supposed to question a queen, but she was Tirsa Lathabris first of all, and she just had to see through her mask and look at the true person behind the queen. And what she had seen so far seemed sincere, so she did not think about it anymore, for now.

When they broke up their camp, Artride started to glance around; clearly feeling uneasy. They walked to a nearby green hill to feel the sun on their skin. She still gazed around.

‘What is it, my L ... Artride?’

She turned to face her and answered quietly, ‘I was hoping to thank the White Lady who helped us... you—’

‘Why would you want to see her? You can thank her in your heart; that’s what I did.’

‘But she was not a spirit, she was real you know,’ Artride said dubiously.

What is real? Tirsa stared at the young queen whose hair waved in the soft breeze and shone healthily, almost had a crimson glow to it, in the rising morning sun. The sun was really bright by now and she squeezed her eyes to mere slits; emerald now like they were in the brightness of the sun, to stare at the queen. Something stirred in her, something she thought she would never feel again. It was like a reawakening all over again; it hit her, starting with a warmth around her heart, making its way down her body. *She is so real; more than flesh and blood, more than spirit, more than Mab—* Ruefully, Tirsa clenched her hands into fists and her nails dug in her palms until they bled. Artride did not realise Tirsa was staring at her, for

she had her eyes fixed on something. Tirsa followed her gaze and saw a white cloud, or rather plume of smoke, change into a large transparent white-clothed woman walking towards them; smiling kindly and wise at the same time.

Artride lost her grace for a moment and ran to meet the woman, but walked right through her. 'Oh—'

The White Lady turned daintily and smiled. 'It's the thought that counts.'

'I do not understand; yesterday I could feel your hand on my shoulder.'

'Yesterday all things were different. Now is today.'

'Not to me; I will never forget what you did for Tirsa, name your prize, Lady and I will see if it is in my power to give it.'

'Dear Artride, be careful with your promises.' She shook her head ruefully. 'It is sad that indeed there is a prize.' And she stared at Tirsa who didn't know what to do, but was stepping a little closer.

'I see you have recovered, dear.'

She recognised her voice. She noticed her hair shone so white, it was like the moon itself.

'I have. Are you ... a spirit?'

'We are all spirit underneath our shells, you of all should know now, but do not be bothered with how I appear. That is of no importance.'

'What's your name?' she asked curiously, and Artride felt stupid for not having asked the same simple question.

'They who worship me call me Roalda, but names are irrelevant. You can consider me a guide.'

'The queen told me. I want to thank you, Roalda.'

‘You have got yourself to thank; you wanted to come back. I merely reminded you.’ And she locked onto her pretty eyes, shining so lively. ‘You are a brave young woman with a lot of potential. Your will and love for others is stronger than your own will to remain; that takes courage.’

Tirsa nodded gravely and touched her chest. ‘The wound ...’

‘The laws of nature are slightly different here. But magic exists everywhere, as does love and hope. That was enough for me, really. I just helped a little.’ And she winked in conspiracy with one eye.

‘Still I am grateful, what is it you want in return?’

What happened to giving without wanting something in return?

‘Your help. I know you two are here to ask the sorceress for some spell.’

‘How do you know this?’ Artride promptly asked, agape.

‘I have been watching you since you got here and overheard some conversations. I understand it is of great importance for you to find her.’

‘Everything depends upon it. Do you know where this sorceress lives?’

‘Of course. She has been ruling this country for centuries, and I am still waiting to guide her to the Other Side.’

‘You want us to kill her?’ Tirsa bluntly asked, sensing Roalda’s discomfort.

Roalda gave a hearty chuckle; a little cynical. ‘If it only could be that simple. You must never forget she is a very powerful magician, even if she doesn’t use her powers the right way; or so to speak, nature’s way. She goes in against everything nature stands for. I despise her for that. But my resentment doesn’t matter; it is for love of my country I want to guide her out of this world.’

‘But you cannot?’ Artride asked.

Her form flickered a little, from anger or sadness or perhaps both.

‘She is too strong for me. I cannot come near her.’

‘What exactly do you know about her? If she is that powerful, do you think she can make a counter spell for a curse this powerful, and do you think she would do?’ Artride asked.

‘What I know is this: she outwits every sorcerer who has tried to bestow her or anyone asking help from her for that matter. She knows many spells and curses; but sadly enough, all for her own benefit and to torture others.’

‘Torture? What kind of sorceress is she that she doesn’t help others?’ Tirsa incredulously asked.

Roalda let go a heavy sigh. ‘There are many types of magician, my dear and she is one of the selfish type.’

Artride and Tirsa exchanged a sad look of understanding.

‘She is evil?’ Artride asked her.

‘It is not for me to judge her.’

‘Then what are our chances?’

‘I honestly cannot say, Artride. I have never met her; I have only heard stories from the Silent Folk that are terrified of her, and I have seen the signs.’

‘What kind of stories?’ Tirsa asked curiously.

‘But if you want us to kill her—’ Artride interrupted.

‘Hold on, ladies. I want you to find out a way to reach her for the spell you need most of all. I know it will be very hard to take her life, but if you are able to ... do not hesitate.’

‘So it’s her life in exchange for mine?’

‘No, Tirsa, I know it must seem that way. I would have asked this from you even so. You will probably have the best chance to do so.’

‘But you said you can’t come near her; why is that?’ Artride asked.

Roalda’s white hair was caught by the wind and blew around her face and shoulders gently. ‘I shall explain.’ And she glanced around. ‘This part of Dochas is not under her spell, yet, but many parts are. Her domain is not far from here, though. We can reach the border by midday. She owns more than half of Dochas; from the first snow-capped mountain range west, all the way to the sea; but her presence can be felt in the whole country really. In her domain, however, everything is twice as dangerous, so I have heard. The border is spell-protected and for me it is not possible to penetrate. For humans it sometimes works. She must want it that way.’

‘I did not know this much,’ Artride reflected idly.

‘I shall tell you more while we travel, come.’

‘Thank you, for we indeed have little time, lives are at stake.’

‘Well you shall need all the time you can get in there, for she will have her ways to try you out and take her time with you two.’

‘She can try!’ Tirsa hotly remarked and grabbed the pommel of the saddle, hauling herself onto the horse’s back. Artride looked proudly at her companion and when she met Roalda’s eyes she smiled thankfully at her.

The blonde woman extended a hand at her queen and helped her up on her horse to be seated behind her.

‘I’ll lead you,’ Roalda said, and started floating before them quite fast.

They stared incredulously at her, and Tirsa dug her heels softly into her horse’s sides as they trotted after her.

~ ~ ~

The remainder of the morning they headed for the domain of the sorceress while Roalda told them everything they needed to know. The gentle terrain slowly gave way to sharp inclines and deep gullies with scattered trees dotting the landscape. Artride held on to Tirsa tightly by her hips to avoid falling off the horse.

‘You should be warned that there is peril and no one has ever met her and made it back alive. There are lots of stories, rumours. One of them being she is human, but resents her own kind and so will probably do anything to keep you out of her domain.’

‘But if she’s human how can she still be alive after centuries?’ asked Tirsa.

‘One explanation is that she must have found a way to stretch her lifespan; one other spell against nature.’

‘During the three centuries she rules, now and then some of the local Silent Folk disappear; occasionally Windchildren, but lately Woodchildren.’

‘No ...’ Tirsa grimly echoed. ‘How is that possible?’

‘It seems they are not immune to her magic anymore. They say the sorceress takes away their magical abilities and as a result they become vulnerable. Are you still willing to go through with it?’

‘Pfff. We have no other choice,’ Artride quietly answered, shaking her head. She had no idea who the Wood – and Windchildren exactly were; but she had heard of the Silent Folk and thought they were immortal and divine little beings. Clearly they were dear to Tirsa.

‘And there is more ...’ Roalda said with a tremor in her voice. Both women waited anxiously for her to continue.

‘Not only humans and Silent Folk are her victims; one of our guides, which was considered a god amongst people, vanished.’

‘A vanished god?’ Artride asked with one brow raised.

‘Gods are not very likely to be overcome by mortals. However, the two of them have been seen together over two centuries ago. It is said that no mortal ever had this much attention from him so she must be special indeed. Despite this unusual relationship, he did not neglect his work. However, all of a sudden, about two hundred and twenty years ago, he disappeared without trace. Nothing was seen or heard of him, anymore.. The gods united, for his presence was well wanted and his work praised; so they worked on a way to find him. But it was no use. Even the gods could not locate him.’

‘He could not have died, because he was immortal, right?’ Tirsa asked.

‘Precisely. He was just nowhere to be found. He must be alive of course; no one, not even this sorceress could kill a god, or I would have seen him for sure. However, the majority of us feel ... or rather know, that this foul woman has indeed something to do with his disappearance.’

‘It does sound extraordinary for a god to disappear without a trace, never to be seen again, but ... if she is that powerful ... we might have a chance to get what we need. Do we know him; what was he called among us mortals?’ Artride asked pensively.

‘Among humans he was simply called ‘The god of knowledge, but his mortal name is only known among us gods of course.’

‘Of course,’ Tirsa said with a hint of humour. ‘Are you saying that with his disappearing a good deal of knowledge is lost?’ she asked.

‘Well, let me put it this way ... everyone who normally prays for the wisdom to do this or that, to understand a situation better or get some clarity, will not be heard nor answered, or receive any useful signs, as was his way, for as long as he is gone. Mortals and immortals alike are on their

own. His task was to help or guide people, not give them clear knowledge; but guidance in order for them to gain that knowledge. A very important task.'

'I see.'

A short silence followed.

'Perhaps you can try to find out what happened to him. It would mean very much to us.'

'We certainly shall,' Artride reflected courteously and nodded at her.

'If you have to use his name, use it,' Roalda said. 'He was mortal once before he became divine. He is more than a thousand years old and born as Eolas. Remember that; Eolas.' Both women nodded and repeated his name; 'Eolas.'

They came across grassy rolling hills covered with many colourful flowers, bathing in the thin sunlight. The frantic cawing of crows, flying above them underlined their uneasy feeling of being watched.

'I feel bad to guide you to her territory, but you are my last hope as well as she is yours.'

'We understand, Roalda, but don't forget this is our own choice. What exactly is your plan? Do you want us to ask her something personally for you, or pass a message?' Artride asked honestly.

'No, concentrate on your own task as much as you can. I have a feeling that will take all your time and energy. It is true I want her existence vanished from Talamh; however, it is too much to ask from any mortal to try and take her life. You might peril your lives, not to mention your spell.'

Tirsa exchanged a troubled look with Roalda. 'Even if she is willing to give us a spell, after all I have heard so far, she can't possibly go

on with her game unpunished. I don't know about you, Artride, but I am willing to take her life after we get what we came for.' And she automatically reached for her sword.

Artride shot a fierce glance at a half turned Tirsa. 'I won't have this discussion, Tirsa. We shall not take any life, is that understood?'

'With all due respect, didn't you just hear what Roalda told us?'

'And did you forget what I told you? Believe not the bad report till it be proved. Now, I will stick to that and so will you. We cannot be involved in this. It all is too much for us to grab a hold of, and to be even the slightest bit of help to this country and this lady here. We do not possess any magic and nor do we have an entire army behind us. We are just the two of us, if we can come close to her at all, but might be risking our task and our lives.' And she looked reluctantly and painfully at Roalda, knowing she owed her, but that it would be almost impossible.

'If we can we shall do everything possible within our ability; you have my word on that, but ... the sorceress must not see us as enemies. If she finds out; it is too high a risk.' And to Tirsa: 'Let's focus on our main task first.'

Roalda nodded slowly, but with understanding, compassionate eyes, and pointed at the nearest forest range. Tirsa turned around so that her back was facing Artride again, but she looked at where Roalda was pointing.

'That wood leads all the way west to the mountains; the border of her domain. If you follow the main track west through the woods you should reach the mountains within a few hours.'

Tirsa halted her horse and both women stared in that direction. Roalda turned to them and locked on to their eyes.

‘Your lives are out of my reach from here; only she can decide what to do with you, but it will be up to you as well. I have heard she is capable of cruel things, but *you* unlike her victims, the local Silent Folk who call Dochas their home, have chosen freely to enter her domain. And no doubt, she will remind you of that fact. Remain close to your heart at all times; and all should be well. Don’t let her get to you. You will probably experience frightful things, but remember, it is all an illusion. It’s in her mind; don’t let her get into yours or you’ll be certainly lost. Your souls are pure and good. Be brave and calm and hopeful; nothing is impossible then. Never doubt, nor give up; how hopeless it may seem. I of all believe in you, but you also have to believe in yourself; your own kindness and goodness. Maybe she won’t help you or truly cannot; but in either case you will have tried. For it is better to search and never to find than never having tried at all.’

Her appearance quavered along with her voice.

She is frightened. Artride thought. *For us.*

‘I certainly will not return without a cure for the curse that lies on our Law Book and she has to be more powerful than Kromdan.’

Tirsa raised her eyebrows and looked questionable at the queen. ‘Who is Kromdan?’

And in a soft voice she answered, ‘That’s that sorcerer who put the curse on the book. I never like mentioning his name.’

‘What’s the name of the old sorceress anyway?’ Tirsa asked Roalda.

‘Like Artride, I do not like mentioning *her* name either and you should sparsely use it. I always have a feeling if I mention her name; she somehow notices me and listens. A very unpleasant feeling.’

‘You feel reluctant to say it now?’

‘I shall whisper it in both your ears.’

And she did. Closely the White Woman leaned over to them; Artride first, and then Tirsa and they both heard her say, ‘Sempervirens.’ Her whisper sounded like a wind growing to be a storm. They both felt Roalda’s fear.

They nodded in conspiracy.

‘Wishing you the best of luck is all that’s left to say. I will think about you and await your return in anticipation.’

‘But wait,’ Tirsa began. ‘You speak of her domain; but do you also know where we have to look for her exact home?’

‘I’m afraid you will have to find that out for yourselves.’

‘But what if she does not want us to find her?’ Artride pondered.

‘If she truly does not, you possibly won’t.’

‘Great.’ Tirsa grimly responded.

Uneasily they said their goodbyes.

Tirsa unfolded the map and marked the spot where they thought they were and where they were heading. They both looked up to gaze at the breathtaking sharp, high-peaked mountains; not the friendly mountains they were used to. These giants seemed uninhabitable and low hanging misty clouds surrounded the eerie peaks. They both hoped it was not the mountains where the sorceress lived or they would be doomed as they did not have the right tools and equipment to be able to travel through such mountains; unless there was a mountain pass of some sorts.

Artride had a frightful vision of a pure white castle on top of those cold mountains; a castle in the skies, where no human had ever set foot; other than skinny little tortured Wind-and Woodchildren. A shiver ran down her spine and she tried to look for comfort in her companion, but she had the same look in her eyes. Tirsa swallowed, but tried to regain her

composure and gave a tiny smile to the queen before both women looked back at the vast domain of Sempervirens where nothing was certain, and without Roalda, not even their lives ...

CHAPTER 7

WOMAN OF STONE

‘From that moment on I promised myself not to be hurt again.

By anyone.’

Sempervirens

‘So they have come,’ the scarlet, black veiled woman, like old blood, whispered with her eyes closed. Her voice held a mixture of content, amusement and high expectation. ‘How fortunate, how very fortunate.’

She did not use any device to watch or hear them. She had no need to. Magic tools were for the untrained and weak, she always told herself. She was the Queen of Dochas and merely had to close her eyes when she wanted to know what was going on in her kingdom. It was she who ruled and controlled the land; *her* land since three centuries now; not nearly long enough to have it entirely her way. *But not to worry*, she reassured herself. *Eternal life is yours to keep and this is just the beginning of greater things. When I am stronger and have all the TalamhClann and their magic behind me, I will stretch my boundaries and finally rule the human race as well. My vengeance will be complete and will know no mercy.* The picture of the two women huddled together, asleep now in the freezing cold, vanished slowly. *And the coming of these two women shall be the start of it all ...* she had a feeling, and her perfect ruby red mouth formed a sly smile.

The weight of ages rode upon her shoulders and when she rose from her sitting position the ache in her bones felt even worse. How long had she been sitting, watching? Time; once her enemy, had almost no meaning to her anymore. Hours slid by and became days, seasons came and went, and she watched it all with not even the slightest notion.

However, to hold her body ageless, she needed to use her wondrous spell; more powerful than time itself. She only had to concentrate and say the words,

‘Curatzia memponza grelanzo menthenze whacondor flan shiantoo Sempervirensssss.’ Merely a whisper to anyone, but enough to make her heart young again and fool her bones, organs, muscles and skin.

Her long scarlet black cloak and veil wavered elegantly along her slim body as she paced her throne room. The woman smiled once more, as she had smiled ever since she found out new ‘guests’ had crossed her enchanted ‘moving’ bridge. The bridge which never was in the same place twice. She could feel them, even if she didn’t watch; breathing her air, trotting her soil. Four of them at the border just some days ago; three died, however one returned from the Other Side; an uncharted mystery even to her. And now that two remained – two women for a change, and very determined, it seemed things were getting interesting, very interesting indeed.

Now all she had to do was wait, and she was most patient – although her servants would not agree on that. Her smile turned into a loud laugh, its shrill sound echoing in the large, almost empty, grey stone-walled chamber. It was both frightening and infectious. She began to hum and then sing an old tempting song, long forgotten by most, raising her arms high. The torches on the walls immediately flared with red hot flames, and the space was filled with its warm, blood-red light. As her voice carried the enchanting tune, formed in the ancient tongue, there was no need for any more thoughts.

It was a way to forget. Where once time was her greatest enemy, it was now her past. No spell could either alter or banish memories from her brain entirely –that were imprinted on her soul – without her losing her

power completely. Without her past, most likely she wouldn't have become the person she now was. More importantly, she wouldn't *be* the sorceress she was at this stage and continuing with her work, her life. She would be long dead and buried, having lived a meaningless little life. No, she *was* her past, just like she was her future.

And although she had sheltered her old unwanted memories from her work and life in a safe part of her subconscious, that in its turn would send the bad memories away to a part of her domain, so that they sometimes popped up unwanted, day or night. For working with magic was working with the subconscious mind. All she could do at those moments was sing her old magical songs someone had taught her long ago, and she would momentarily forget. That was necessary for her survival and her sanity. Her servants would recognize the song and know she would call for them soon. And they would obey.

Oh, yes, tonight she would call for her favourite, beautiful servant and celebrate the coming of her new promising guests.

Her heart was dark and cold; but she cared for her servants in her own cruel way. She nourished them, like they nourished her – and all were content.

CHAPTER 8

TREES AND RIDDLES

Cold are the western winds in both summer and in winter days

Long are the hours in wait

But I'll wait the time to come

*What else can I do, then waving with the wind, feeling the worms eating
my toes away, blind and deaf like them, but still awfully aware.*

*When, oh when will you release me from this dreadful fate I was not
intended to be?*

*Oh, please someone ... where are the birds and the squirrels? Can't you
hear the plea from my crying lonely soul?*

*Will it be tomorrow? Will it last another year? Will it be a dozen years or
will it be a century?*

*Will I still be here when the world dies, burning alive, or will I have to
wait in vain until I wither away, slowly; like the rest of the trees...*

When entering the wood they were very alert and rode slowly on the sandy path through the oak and beech trees. It was unusually quiet with no sign of birds in the canopy, or other life.

‘A Silent Place again,’ Artride concluded.

Tirsa's heartbeat pounded in her throat when she remarked, ‘I believe there is a reason why there is no life here, other than these odd twisted trees, I mean just look at them.’ She tugged at the reins to halt the horse, and they both had a better look at the trees. If one never really cared to look at an oak or a beech tree no difference would be found, but for Tirsa and Artride, who had both grown up close to nature – Zoria and

Ceartas both being covered with mixed dense woods – it looked like the trees had some sort of disease or growth defect.

‘They are smaller and more twisted than other oaks, I should say,’ Artride said with a gasp.

‘Especially these beeches. Maybe due to a growing disorder, a disease or a hostile kind of soil,’ and Tirsā jumped off, knelt down and removed the dry leaves, cupping a handful of dark soil.

‘Hmm, the soil seems alright, but who knows what’s in it exactly.’ And she stared at the oak tree in front of her; a sturdy trunk with a rough bark, green with a layer of moss and with long twisted branches spread widely and reaching towards the sky, like they were arms either begging for help or surrendering. The leaves were smaller and less in number than a healthy oak tree would have, but showed no sign of disease.

‘They seem so sad,’ the queen remarked, staring with sympathetic eyes.

Tirsa got up and walked over to her.

‘Hmm, something is amiss with them alright.’

Artride laid a hand on the tall, twisted beech tree in front of her, feeling its smooth grey bark. Instantly she pulled her hand back. Tirsa looked at her with alarm. ‘What is wrong?’

With an incredulous look, she stared back. ‘It’s warm! I never felt a tree bark so warm when not standing in the sun!’ and she repeated the gesture and tried to focus on the spirit of the tree, using her power to heal. Energy radiated from her to that of the slender tree, first soothing and calming and then feeling its weak life-spark awaken under her touch, giving it strength. She leaned forward until her forehead touched the warm bark, feeling its confused sad spirit vibrating through her soul, whispering, *Heeeeeeeeeeeeeellllllppppppppppppppmmmmmeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee*

Quickly she broke contact, stumbling backwards.

Tirsa jumped to catch her.

‘It spoke, Tirsa,’ she muttered after a short silence. ‘It ... no – *she* spoke to me.’ She had never heard trees speak to her before, or any other being when she healed a person. It had felt like some sort of mind link.

Tirsa could see her swallow away her fear before she held a hand to her chest to soothe her own rapid beating heart. ‘What ... did it say?’

‘Help me.’ And she glanced back at the tree, sorry for having broken the link, but frightened at the same time.

‘I have felt life in trees before and their calm soothing content strength, but not such a helpless spirit and never with a voice. It ... did not really feel like a tree at all. It felt human.’

‘Congratulations!’ a low creaky voice announced suddenly.

The women looked in the direction of the voice and Tirsa drew her sword at the same time. A small, sturdy man examined them from behind a tree, with oval deep covered eyes. He was humanoid, but looked very much like a stocky tree with his long arms, one longer than the other with long woody fingers and green fingernails, and his skin was leathery and grey-brown like an old leaf. He wore no clothes, but his slender body was covered with tangles of moss and dry leaves and branches. It appeared he had no neck, and on his head tiny branches grew instead of hair. His wrinkled face, like that of an old man, was hard to read; however his amber eyes sparkled bright in a combination of joy and wickedness.

‘Good woman, you guessed right,’ he added cheerfully, and stepped closer.

‘Halt, no further!’ Tirsa stated sternly, pointing her sword at him, sensing his wickedness.

The tree creature's mouth twisted into a broad smile, but his eyes didn't show a sign of amusement.

‘That’s my line, girl, but I wanted to be kind, because this lady here guessed for the first time in years.’

The queen gestured to Tirsa to lower her weapon and asked the tree creature, ‘I guess that these trees are not trees at all, but humans trapped?’ and she narrowed her eyes so that they were almost closed and added, ‘Like you, only you stand somewhere in the middle of some changing process, how come?’ She stepped closer. Tirsa widened her eyes in amazement, like the little man.

It took him a little while to recover. ‘You are in no position to ask the questions. That’s my task. So, who are you?’ His voice creaked like old wood .

‘I see,’ she was a little reluctant to give him their names. Names held a certain power and when you gave a name, especially here, people who knew magic could use it for better or for worse. But she remembered Roalda’s words that names were irrelevant and decided not to make him angry, but to stay polite to keep out of trouble.

‘Well, I am Queen Artride of Ceartas,’ and she laid her left hand upon her heart. ‘And this is Commander Tirsa Lathabris of the Seventh Company.’ The two women exchanged a quick glance, Tirsa gave her a half smile.

‘Yeah, yeah, Queen, Commander, Seventh Company ... like I care.’ He muttered like he was talking to somebody else.

‘We came to visit the powerful sorceress of this land,’ the queen began in a kind voice.

‘Perhaps you know where we can find her?’

‘Enough!’ his eyes glowed fiercely.

‘Wait a minute tree man, this happens to be a queen and you do not talk like that to a queen,’ Tirsa said . This seemed to upset the tree creature even more and his face was set in lines of dissatisfaction, and now his eyes glowed red. *Maybe he will set fire to himself if he gets too angry.* she thought, not intimidated by him at all.

‘Hush, Tirsa, let me handle this.’ And she turned. ‘We do not want to be disrespectful, sir, but now you know our names, can we have yours, that’s only courtesy.’

‘My name is of no importance to you, I am a guard. You know where you are and I am here to prevent the land from any unwanted company.’

‘Unwanted? But we would like to ask permission to enter. Do I have to address to you?’ Artride asked kindly.

‘These are the rules; I ask the questions and you answer. Simple as life should be, right?’

‘Go ahead, ask anything you want if you let us pass.’

‘Only if your answers are correct, shall I let you pass, lady. If not ... look around.’ Artride’s heart sank and she knew what he was going to say. ‘That is what your fate will be.’ His mean eyes lit up in his cracked brown face.

She wanted to ask so many questions, but she remembered what the guard had said and held back. He saw her reluctant expression and smiled viscously.

‘How difficult can it be?’ she whispered to Tirsa, but then she looked around and there were so many twisted trees; a whole wood, maybe a hundred, maybe more. ‘Poor souls.’

‘Exactly Artride, and I do not want you to turn into a tree, so I will answer any question he has.’

They spoke softly, so that the tree guard could not hear them.

‘We are in this together, remember?’ *Together*. It sang in Tirsa’s head.

She nodded finally.

‘Have you made up your mind?’

‘We have. State your rules, please, and they better be fair ones.’ Artride spoke loudly and her eyes shone dark and straight at him.

‘You can always go back to where you came from.’ The tree guard shrugged.

‘No, we cannot.’

He came a little closer and halted a few steps in front of them. Tirsa could smell his sweat, like rotting mulch.

‘I have four riddles for you. And only if you have solved them all may you enter. There is only one answer and you can only guess once.’

Queen and bodyguard exchanged glances and Artride looked a little pale.

‘Riddles? You didn’t mention that.’

‘Riddles, questions; it’s the same to me. A fact is a fact, an opinion is an opinion and you have riddles ...’

Only one truth ... Tirsa thought.

‘Four riddles for each of us?’

‘Four riddles for both, no more. You can solve them together as one, ‘cause an unsolved riddle is like a wood with no trees.’

‘Isn’t there anything else we can offer you?’ Artride suddenly suggested and leaned forward in an appealing way. ‘Anything?’ and she winked at him.

His human side was affected by her charm and turned silent as his eyes became milder. ‘But my riddles ...’

‘I am sure there will be other candidates for them.’ And she looked around, while he stared at her, licking his dry lips. Well, there had been, but lately over the last twenty years only three and all failed of course. His riddles were his job and his life ...

He stepped back and realised just in time she was trying to empower him, like another young woman once had done, decades ago. He didn’t want to think about her and the trap she had set for him ...

‘No! That can take years! It’s up to you; solve my riddles or leave. What’s it going to be?’

Artride bit her lip in dissatisfaction and avoided Tirsa’s prying eyes. She understood the queen had wanted to do it her way, but had failed and now it was her turn.

‘Neither!’ she screamed and threw herself quickly upon him, but when she reached the floor he was gone. Surprised she gazed around to find him on the lowest branch of an oak tree to her right. She didn’t want to show her frustration. He laughed and while she stood, she hastily faced Artride.

‘Come on let’s go.’ She softly grabbed her arm and guided her to her horse, which was waiting impatiently. She clutched the reins, put a foot in one stirrup and hauled herself onto Fiosa, extending a helping hand to the queen. Tirsa could clearly see she had her doubts.

‘You think I shall let you pass?’ and he side-glanced theatrically at the silent trees around them.

‘He is bluffing, Artride.’ And still she held her extended hand in front of her. They exchanged glances, that of Artride afraid and insecure. However, she did lay her hand in hers, trusting her, building on her years of knowledge in the army, forgetting her own gained wisdom in dealing with people. She only wanted to follow Tirsa, anywhere. When she looked

into her eyes she seemed to forget her worries and her country and ... everything. She was getting selfish.

Sitting behind her companion and seeing the determined eyes of the tree guard, she understood their mistake.

Tirsa didn't look at him, but guided the horse gingerly past him. 'He is half a tree himself,' she reassured the queen. 'This sorceress must have done this to him. He has no powers, otherwise he would turn himself back into a man, wouldn't he?' she said loud enough for him to hear.

'So you want proof of my power, is that it?'

She is playing with fire. Artride was thinking and held her breath. I should do something to stop her!

Promptly his stocky figure stood in front of them and made a simple waving gesture with one hand towards Tirsa. The leaves of the trees around them were rustling, even though there had been no wind. She felt a tingling cold feeling in the fingers of her right hand and stared at her numbing hand which soon stiffened. The skin turned grey-brown and became thicker. Her eyes opened wide in distress. She grabbed her right arm with her left hand and her face turned pale from fear and pain. She couldn't feel her hand anymore and noticed grimly that her nails fell off and drops of blood fell with them as tiny branches replaced the nails. Slowly the branches grew, longer and longer, and fresh green leaves folded themselves open, and the painful tingling feeling moved up her arm towards her elbow and then up to her shoulder until her whole arm had turned into a branch with leaves.

'You see, I don't mind,' the tree guard announced dryly. 'Another tree.'

'Stop that!' Artride commanded, shocked to see what was happening. Tirsa was clearly in pain, gritting her teeth and closing her eyes

against the tears.

The tree guard faced the queen. 'Do you think it is enough evidence, fair lady?'

'It is enough. We believe you,' she snarled.

'Hmm, and what about you, Commander?'

'Yes!' she hissed through gritted teeth.

'I did not hear you. What was that?' and the leaves and moss on his body waved and rustled. Artride stiffened from anger when she saw that the tree man enjoyed his role as torturer.

'Yes, I believe you! Now, give me back my arm!' tears were rolling down her cheeks, flushed now.

He again made a simple movement with his arm and Artride waited impatiently to see Tirsa's arm turn back to normal. She was breathing heavily and sighed, still trembling, feeling pins and needles in her arm, but at least it was returning to life again.

'Are you alright?'

Tirsa nodded, still watching her arm, embarrassed and refusing to meet the eyes of the queen.

'Go ahead. State your riddles, but remember your promise. If we answer them correctly, you'll let us pass,' Artride announced strictly.

'Agreed. The first riddle!' and he narrowed his yellow eyes, which glowed like fire.

'What is ... the silence after a storm of anger, frustration, vengeance, fear and ... bloodshed?'

Artride stared at Tirsa to see if she was in on this and still rubbing her arm, she frowned.

'That storm must be symbolic for war, that much is clear,' she stated softly and Artride nodded approvingly.

‘But that silence ... death?’ and she bit her lip. Tirsa looked thoughtful. It was very quiet around them, like the trees were listening too, waiting for their answer as well as the tree guard. And she tried to remember if it was quiet on the other side, but failed. When she thought about the end of a war that she twice had experienced, she remembered the peace treaties, even if they were forced upon the enemy, that were signed after the many losses.

‘I thought about peace,’ Tirsa whispered in the queen’s ear. ‘But there isn’t always peace after a war. There can still be hatred among countries and people, deep-rooted hatred even,’ she stated.

‘However peace, agreed and signed for or not, is a silence in a way,’ Artride added. ‘Yes, especially after all the noises and hustle of a war.’ Tirsa remembered all too well.

‘So, answer him that, Tirsa.’

Dubiously she examined Artride to see if she meant it.

She did.

Tirsa swallowed away her distress from her former defeat and stared the tree guard straight in the eyes when she said, ‘Peace. The answer is peace.’

The tree guard was pleased and shrieked in a high voice, ‘The one and only good answer! Well done!’

Artride touched Tirsa’s shoulder and patted her proudly, withholding an urge to embrace her waist from behind. She seemed to lighten up now that the queen was proud of her again and her self-esteem rose..

‘Three more, ladies. What are men without money and ... possessions in a paradise?’

‘A paradise?’ Tirsa asked reluctantly, but the man didn’t respond.

‘What is that for a riddle?’ and she shook her head.

‘Come on, Tirsa, think with me. A paradise means you have everything that nature has to offer you, I should say; so men do not need money, but what *are* they? I assume a man is not alone, otherwise that would be a bit lonely. So a group of people – men, would they be lost, poor, happy?’

‘Perhaps indeed most would feel more lost than happy at first, but that’s personal isn’t it, considering the fact of what you leave behind and all that you will miss?’

‘So, happy would be too obvious or subjective, would it?’

‘Hmm, if you don’t have any money and possessions left, you are poor, right? However, in a paradise you have no use for that, for a paradise holds everything you need,’ Artride thought out aloud.

‘Wealthy.’ They both said at the same time and laughed about that.

The tree guard had heard them and answered, ‘Right again!’ a little surprised this time.

They cheered and Artride almost jumped off the horse. The tree guard was strangely amused himself, for the more riddles they solved, the more he could ask them. The closer he would get towards his own freedom as well; however, he didn’t think about that anymore. Riddles were his life now. Freedom was something less than a word and he couldn’t even remember the feeling, let alone crave it. He knew they wouldn’t make it through to the fourth riddle. No one ever had, but to ask three unique riddles; even if it came from a voice planted in his brain, somewhere behind his wooden skull, was more that he could hope for. Most candidates only made it to the second riddle, some to the third.

‘Now, the third riddle. Concentrate. You always carry it with you, even though you’ll die many times. It survives everything. It is hidden

deeply, but sometimes shows itself as lightning, other times as a gentle wave. Sounds and smells are its closest friends.’ The two women listened and realised this was already the third riddle.

‘It is older than the oldest tree,’ and he giggled amused about the irony. ‘And the highest mountain. What is that?’

They asked him to repeat the riddle one more time and both fell silent.

After a short moment Artride whispered, ‘Maybe the soul or your true self, that never dies, you taught me that.’

‘Hmm, but not every soul is old; older than the oldest tree and mountain, and what about showing itself as lightning or a wave? No it must be something else.’

‘Hmm, it is hidden deeply, but then again not always; what could that be?’

‘Your history, that’s something you’ll always carry with you. You can not outrun it, it is who you are, what you have become,’ Tirsa said, rubbing her sleeves.

‘Yes, Tirsa, it could be just that. If you say that we have lived before and will live on; you will carry your past with you, deeply, even though you forget, it is old and the oldest thoughts hidden deeper than the freshest. And sometimes memories come up when you hear a familiar sound, or smell a fragrance; it comes like lightning or a gentle wave; pleasant memories, and bad ones as well.’ Her dark blue eyes twinkled, remembering herself those moments.

She nodded and they agreed. ‘Your past.’

The yes of the tree guard almost popped out of his long head. ‘Correct again!’

Artride shook Tirsa's hand and laid the other warm hand upon hers. Gratefully she stared at her, smiling and near tears.

'The fourth and final question! Ready?' he asked really content with them and himself. The women did not understand, but at this point did not care.

'It is the key to peace and harmony, a pure and true thing which cannot be taught, only when experienced can it be fully understood. If you give it away, to one person or more, you will not lose it, but you will get more eventually. What is it?'

'But that's easy!' Artride almost yelled and glimpsed at a horrified Tirsa.

'Can you not guess, Tirsa?'

'I have an idea, and you?' she said earnestly.

'It is love; the answer to all problems, the key to harmony!'

The tree guard bowed deeply, so that his hair-like branches touched the forest floor.

He smiled such a warm smile, that they had not seen from him before and in a low voice he softly said, 'You have convinced me. All four answers were correctly answered. Take hereby your entry to the domain of Sempervirens. Greetings and welcome to you!' and he vanished like smoke into air.

They jumped off the horse and flew into each other's arms, embracing one another tightly, cheering and laughing.

'We've done it, Tirsa! I said we would make an excellent team, didn't I?' she said still hugging her closely, smelling the rain and sun on her skin, her hair and a hint of jasmine. 'Yes, you did.' With tears in her eyes Tirsa held a little longer on to her, but then seemed suddenly aware of

the distance she was supposed to keep from the queen, as a bodyguard, and parted with her eyes down.

‘I don’t not understand why they were so easy, though,’ Tirsa said to break the sudden tension, and watched the trees, like she expected them to change back into humans. Unfortunately it did not work that way. ‘Well, we made it,’ the queen responded quietly, staring at the trees as well, realising they once were humans all to well.

‘But why didn’t they?’

‘Maybe we can ask the sorceress to release them. We can’t do anything for them now and I doubt the wicked tree guard could or wanted to,’ Tirsa stated when she saw it was bothering Artride.

‘I have a feeling it was some sort of test,’ Artride suggested. ‘To get into her domain, and that this is only the beginning.’

‘You could be right about that, but come on, my Lady. We will see what tomorrow brings.’

They mounted their horse and Tirsa suddenly looked stone white. ‘What is it, Tirsa?’

Staring at the empty sword cane she muttered, ‘My sword. It’s gone!’

‘How can that be?’

‘I cannot be of any use without my sword,’ she muttered as if she hadn’t heard the question.

‘Nonsense. I suppose we are not allowed to wear weapons in this domain of hers we are entering. Something or someone magical must have taken it, otherwise you would have noticed. Although we do not have hostile intentions, so ...’

How naïve she is! Tirsa thought acidly and as if the queen had heard the unspoken remark she said, ‘We shall have to respect the ways of

this country and if it means no weapons than that's the way it's going to be. Do not worry. I know that you can protect me without your sword, is it not?'

Tirsa nodded stubbornly. 'I just had not thought I would have to do without.'

Artride smiled reassuringly at her. 'You will do fine.'

They continued their way through the oak and beech wood, avoiding looking at the sad odd tree creatures too much, which strangely, somehow, seemed not that sad anymore. Perhaps they too gained some hope.

'We forgot to ask him whereabouts the sorceress lives.'

'I doubt he would have told us,' Tirsa reflected cynically.

'But he seemed kinder when we solved his riddles. He might have told us.'

'Let's see if we can find some sort of path to those snow-capped mountains west.' Tirsa pointed and urged her horse on. 'A track leads mostly to someplace.'

CHAPTER 9

DESPERATE THOUGHTS

*Death and misery
Stench and decay
Poisoned ground,
Darkness
enclosing my mind
Pulling, grabbing
at my very being
It's so easy to give in to end it all...*

When the sun was highest they left the trees behind and reached the first mountain range. The terrain began to descend; gradually at first, then more steeply. All sizes of loose grey rocks lay scattered about, discouraging various forms of life. Roalda had said that the domain of Sempervirens should start behind these mountains and that those were a natural border.

‘Perhaps they are protected by another guard,’ Artride warned. ‘We should be cautious.’

With the sun shining on their faces, and crossing a wide, rather wet mountain valley full of blossoming tiny flowers, such as daisies and small bluebells between thin grass, they felt relaxed and at ease. A few birch trees had managed to nestle their roots in the wet rocky soil, and although small they waved gently in the wind. There was no track to follow, so they used the sun as a guide to find the west.

They decided to rest and eat a little at a nice spot with a marvellous view of the slanting rays of the spring sun glistening on the snow-capped peaks. It had been quite steep and Fiosa needed to rest and drink water.

Artride jumped off the horse and stretched her legs before reaching a hand to Tirsa. She grabbed it without thinking and let herself slide from the saddle. When touching the ground and almost falling into her arms, she looked up at the queen who was the same height as her, looking her straight in the eye for a fleeting moment and smelling her intoxicating sweet scent; like strawberries or –no – it came to Tirsa: passion fruit. Rapidly she tried to look away, only to see her appealing long legs and hips in the tight fitting black trousers and black knee length boots. Artride still held her hand, but there was no apparent reason for that anymore, so Tirsa let go and turned around to avoid her stare: as if the queen wanted to make some sort of connection. It confused her, making her feel uncomfortable and vulnerable. *I wanted to look ...* She was growing too close and feeling too much. Feelings of attachment and yearning had been gradually building up ever since she had first become involved. This could only serve to complicate her life.

Tirsa opened the saddlebags to get to the food and the water bag. ‘We have to refill it soon, my Lady,’ she announced, trying to regain the wanted distance.

When she did not answer she glimpsed at Artride, noticing she was staring into nowhere, with an absentminded, sad expression on her face. It reminded her of Mabel, who could look the same in troubled times; locked up in her own thoughts, ten thousand miles away.

I do not want to compare Artride with my Mabel; they are so dissimilar. Mabel had been a girl when alive, while Artride was a woman. She had such a typical kind of humour, Tirsa always admired that in her. It amazed her that she could think of her now and not feel that terrible pain anymore. It upset her slightly, but she remembered what Mabel had told her while she was on the other side and she knew she was letting her go,

finally. The emptiness and the missing still remained, but that had been with her for so long now she had grown used to that. Somehow the emptiness seemed to fill up by the appealing presence of the queen.

They were silent when they settled against a big rock, eating their simple meal of bread and dried fruit.

After a quiet afternoon they reached a wide open area with lumps of grass and plants that grew near water, which indicated this was peat. Its width stretched as far as they could see, but they noticed a small forest framing the distance in the west, the direction in which they were still heading.

‘A strange place for peat,’ Artride remarked, knowing the mountain valleys could be wet, but peat, however, normally was to be found further below.

‘Things are different here, remember Roalda told us.’

‘Well, fact remains we have to cross it somehow,’ Artride stated, examining the muddy soil with her feet. ‘There seems to be no way around it.’

Tirsa dismounted and stepped on a sod. ‘I will check if it’s safe enough.’ And she carefully stepped from sod to sod, not to get her feet wet, so that the queen would not when following her. She trod heavily on one sod and nodded approvingly. Artride saw her stepping off a sod and sinking to her knees in the water, but no deeper. She reached for the grass and crawled onto a sod to get up again. Her black boots were shiny black-brown from thick, sticky mud. Insects immediately buzzed around her, attracted by the foul smell. The queen could smell it too when she returned, standing next to her.

‘Some sods are looser than others and you have to be aware that they are floating in the peat underneath. The smell is awful is it not?’ and

she made an ugly face.

‘To put it mildly,’ Artride laughed. ‘You better find the best spots to step on then.’

Tirsa glanced at Fiosa and bit her lip.

‘You feel reluctant to lead her across?’

‘Yes, I am afraid that with her weight she will sink. I have seen it happen before. Horses are too heavy for this. If you do not mind I would like her to stay.’

Artride’s face was unreadable. ‘It’s your decision. However, without her we shall be slower. We are approaching the end of the first week.’

‘I am awfully aware of that. The home of the sorceress can’t be too far away now. If necessary we will travel day and night. And Fiosa here will wait for us. Most likely we will go the same way back.’

Artride had an incredulous expression on her face.

‘She will wait for us?’

Tirsa smiled lightly and said daintily, ‘She is very loyal, she will be around.’ And she turned to her horse and loaded a backpack with most of the contents of the saddlebags. After she patted her on the neck and caressed her over her nose she said her goodbyes.

‘What if we do not return, Tirsa, will she still be waiting ... in vain?’

Reluctantly she stared at the mare and quietly reflected, ‘We will return.’

She doesn’t want to lose her as well.

Tirsa soon joined her, hauling the heavy backpack onto her back.

Artride followed and watched her every move. Tirsa moved like a fox; very light-footed and slim.

The first few hundred metres went rather well. Some sods sank faster than others, so they had to be quick; but they managed them with getting their boots just a little wet.

Tirsa had to think about people of long ago who sacrificed members of their tribe to places like this in order to satisfy their gods for assuring a good harvest season or so that the sun would return. The person, most likely already killed, would sink and the peat around the body would not consume it, but preserve it for many centuries because of a lack of oxygen in the peat needed for digestion, until it was found and exposed to air. Tirsa had seen dark shrivelled bodies, but quite intact, which had been found by peat cutters in the moors in the east of Ceartas. The compact lumps of peat were a wanted, but expensive fuel for the fires of the households in Ceartas. The fire was warmer and lasted longer than a wood-fire.

Above the ancient layer of peat was the younger layer; containing rotting plant and animal life, floating in the dark mud around it.

When their feet came loose from a sod, a foul smell would come with it – from the younger layer, exposed to the air. The water was pitch-black and mosquitoes and little flies were following the two women. And in addition it was getting warmer, although the sun was hiding behind thin clouds. The air was moist and hot, without any sign of wind.

The flies were bothering Artride and she waved with her hands to get rid of them and to create a little wind, but that did not seem to help much. They were not only attracted by the foul smell of the rotting water, but by their salty sweat as well; forming tiny drops on their foreheads and sticking in their hair.

It became slightly harder to move on as well, for the sods became fewer and there was more water, and when they did step on a loose sod, it

would sink awfully fast and their feet with it. Tirsa moved faster than her queen could cope with and many times she had to extend a hand to her and prevent her from slowly sinking.

Increasingly they were surrounded by shallow water and in addition to that the heat became oppressive; the sun scorching them.

‘Can we not just swim from here?’ Artride asked with a tiny voice. Tirsa stopped to look at her and at the same time she sank a few feet. It was still a couple of hundred steps to the other side, where a thin forest began, but for all they knew even those trees stood in water. They were birch trees, she noticed, and knew they could grow in water quite easily.

‘Too many plants to get trapped in, and besides, it’s not deep enough. We would not get far,’ she answered and peered around to find the best way. ‘But look, there is not much water over there anymore, not many sods either, but I do see some grass-like plants, those with the white plumes. But they can stand in mud all the same, so I don’t know that it’s safe to go to.’ She gazed doubtfully at Artride.

‘To be honest, My Lady, it does not appear to be safe at all to go on. We could drown in here.’

Artride’s face showed a flicker of fear, but she was persistent. ‘There is no other way is there?’

‘No, but – ’

‘So let’s try it further shall we?’ Tirsa bit her lower lip and nodded, content with her answer.

She tried to walk fast and light-footed despite the heavy backpack, followed closely by the queen, who more than once almost fell and sank to her knees, because the sods Tirsa had stood on sank before Artride could step on them.

At one time she sank to her waist, so deep that she could only get one leg loose. Tirsa tried to pull her out and after some time her foot came free with a sucking sound, but without a boot. She fell forward and with help she got up on a steady piece of soil; tired, desperate and covered with smelly mud and with tear-stung eyes. 'I hate this stinking place!' and she scratched some mud from her tunic and threw it back with force.

'Don't give up, Artride. We're almost there,' she tried to encourage her. And she gave her a steady hand before they went on and held on to her. Tirsa had her eyes focused on the other side where the trees were, and had her hopes there while Artride; looking around at the discouraging smelly place with its buzzing flies and mosquitoes, and its many sinking spots, felt heavy and drawn to the mud beneath her; pulling her legs and feeling down. She tried not to think about it, but looked at Tirsa and saw how full of hope she was; but she kept thinking, *What if there is no way out of here?*

Tirsa felt her arm stretching and dropping and the hand of Artride tightening. When she looked down she saw her sinking in the mud again; already to her hips, struggling to get loose. Tirsa was up to her knees in the mud, but with steady soil underneath her.

'It is pulling at me, Tirsa. I cannot get loose!'

'Hold on, I will pull you out again.' And she leaned backwards and pulled. Artride fell forward, but her legs did not loosen a bit. Instead her entire body was under and she tried to keep her head above the closing dark mud. 'Tirsa, it's a swamp!'

She could not fathom that. A swamp? If so, why for one did *she* not sink? She did not understand why this happened to Artride while she only sank as far as her knees, and only realized the seriousness of the situation when she could not drag Artride out, not one inch. 'My legs are stuck, I

cannot move!’ she breathed heavily. Tirsa did not let go of her hand and grabbed the other as well, pulling with all her strength. She fell backwards and panicked when she saw it did not do any good. Tirsa stood up, covered with the dark mud and looked at Artride whose face was set in scorn and fear. *What if she drowns here? What if we lose her?*

At that moment Tirsa lost her own hope and she began to sink and felt the sucking mud pulling at her legs, like a wide fishlike mouth.

She understood.

Artride saw her face getting brighter and happy. ‘No, we are in a magical land, Artride! This might be a swamp, but it can’t be a normal swamp, because I’m not sinking, not until I lost my hope!’

She thought about that and felt ashamed when she saw Tirsa struggling to get her out, while she had lost her hope so soon.

‘Come on, help me,’ Tirsa commanded. ‘Have faith in yourself!’

But the queen felt something hard sticking into her thigh and pulled it out of the mud to look at it. She screamed with fear when she recognized it; it was a hand, half-rotten away, greasy and muddy, a human hand. Quickly she threw it away.

‘No, do not be afraid, Artride! Just see it as a token, not as something to scare you! This will only happen when you make it so! Fight it!’

After a fleeting moment Artride regained composure and realized she was right.

She felt a new feeling rushing through her body, faith and trust, not only in her bodyguard, but mainly in herself and their aim. *We will succeed. We will find our way through this!* she thought, even with her chin up to mud, but her eyes were sharp and focused again.

Instead she visualized herself being in water and that she had the power to swim and rise if she wanted to. Slowly she felt the mud-mouth losing its grip.

Tirsa was still pulling and when Artride screamed, ‘Now, Tirsa, pull harder!’ she slid out of the mud towards her companion who caught her and pulled her onto more solid ground. There they waded quickly through the thick mud, no longer sinking, to the side where the trees stood. Exhausted, they dragged themselves onto the roots and up.

There, on the solid grassy ground they rested and came to their senses. Breathing fast Artride laughed and cried at the same time. Both were soaked, covered in chocolate brown mud and smelly. Artride’s face was full of mud stains and drops of sweat, and her dark braid was fluffy and moist and clutched to her skull, while her clothes, once colourful and clean were now stained with dark mud. Tirsa was not much better off; half sitting, leaning, panting, using the rucksack as a cushion.

They just sat, panting, trying to calm down and looking at one another. Artride fell silent and glanced numbly at the swamp, but Tirsa had a triumphal expression on her face. ‘We have crossed a swamp – probably magical – and still are able to tell it!’ she said. Artride did not respond, just sighed and was near to tears.

‘Isn’t that a reason to be pleased about? I mean we have crossed a magical swamp; most likely another protected area, but we have outwitted it.’

‘I guess so.’

‘I guess so? Artride, we are alive!’ she said incredulously. ‘I have a feeling not every traveller here in Dochas can say the same. I bet if they would dry this swamp and start digging we would find a lot more bodies than just that one hand.’

Tirsa saw a tear rolling down the queen's dirty cheek when she looked at her, which left a small clear stream among the dark stains. 'I almost gave up. You found out it was magical in spite of all the warnings Roalda gave us. It did not cross my mind anymore until you mentioned it.'

Tirsa had an urge to touch her to give her consolation, but instead smiled at her with an encouraging twinkle in her eyes, looking bright green as young saplings in the sun.

'But you did not. Almost is not quite.'

She smiled faintly with gleaming grateful eyes. You are not my bodyguard, Tirsa. You are my saviour.

'We smell!' the blonde woman suddenly called out and stood, checking the backpack which was soaked. The food, which was packed in paper was even drenched with mud as was the map, their two blankets and the extra clothes. They decided to throw it all away except for their blankets and the water bag, for even the clothes were so dirty and they had no soap to wash them with. They would just attract a lot of unwanted insects. The clothes they wore were no better; their once colourful outfit had an overall dark brown colour now and they looked like peasants.

'We are really going undercover now!' Tirsa tried to cheer her up.

They decided to find a place to try to wash both the clothes and themselves. And the nights were still chilly, so they were better off with a smelly blanket than with none.

Artride took off her one left knee boot and threw it into the swamp as well. Almost immediately the mud closed in the boot and devoured it. 'It is like we are feeding it,' she said with a swallowed breath and stared at Tirsa, who was pulling her own boots off and extended them to her. She stared away and silently remarked. 'No, Tirsa you will need them just the same.'

‘My feet are used to walking barefoot, please take them.’

‘Tirsa, I cannot.’

‘I insist.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Positive. The soles on my feet are rock hard; like old leather.’ And she laughed.

She sighed and reached for them.

‘Only because my feet are not and to end a discussion. I hate arguing.’

Tirsa nodded while Artride put on her boots, which fitted her perfectly. She decided to throw her helmet away as well.

‘We seem to lose more and more on our way,’ The queen concluded, shivering against the cold, walking fast through the thin birch wood.

‘Our horses, our weapons, our clothes, our ... food. How will we find food in here while we cannot trust anything?’

Tirsa tried to sound strong when she remarked, ‘Like the animals here do; we follow our instinct.’

CHAPTER 10

CLOSER

A guiding star leads the way, past clouds of secrecy

Where to? Closer.

Only those that dare can. And time will tell.

If time is patient enough ...

Dashim drew a deep breath to let in the little fresh air that was to be found in the damp, hot kitchen. There was a small round opening in the stone ceiling, just enough for the vapour to escape to who knows where. In the beginning, some four autumns ago, the thought of escaping had been with him day and night, despite the strong magic getting a grip of his very being. However, soon he found out it was impossible to flee; if he still had wanted to. His freewill was taken from him; somewhere in a light corner of his shadowed mind he understood that, but fighting for regaining his true self was not worth the effort anymore.

As he watched the white smoke plumes going up, in a far end of his thinning memories he knew there had been a spell he'd once known to become one with the essence of the smoke, containing water and air elements, and let himself rise. But why would he want to remember?

Slowly he placed a deep ceramic plate on the stove, and looked up at Branco, the greenish, well trained Woodchild, cutting strange vegetables. Outside, perhaps they would have been friends, but not here. Here they endured each other, like the rest did. In his dream state Dashim still felt lonely, because he was the only one of his race. He was a grown Windchild; a carrier of messages of the many voices of the wind. Ancient and once untouchable – until she came along.

A beautiful maiden easily tricked the fair-haired, tall, handsome lad; a woman of human origin, and when he awoke he found himself trapped within an enormous cave; one of the most horrible places to be for a Windchild. There, where there is no wild wind, no appealing memories and tales to be brought to him and carried further. There, where there is silence, boredom sets in. Moreover his magic abilities were taken from him. There were others like him here; slaves to the enchanting queen of Dochas. But many got sick and died of Windhunger and misery. He was the last Windchild still alive in here, but a few Woodchildren were brought in to replace his dead relatives.

He did not hate her – if only a Windchild could hate. It was impossible to think clearly these days without the wind; there had been a thick heavy cloud inside his head ever since and the memories of his family and friends grew thinner with the years, as with his memories of clouds and freedom. The most important person and goal in his life was the queen now. She was the wind and the clouds now filling his mind. She was in his mind constantly and when she called for him, he felt his aching hunger stilled if only for a moment.

Like the others he made her life easier; he had different chores, practical and very earthbound – washing dishes, cleaning the floor, changing the beds and sometimes she wanted him in her bed beside her, lusting for his mysterious, enchanting beauty and craving his yearning for her, their bodies like a storm together. She was careful with him though, since the other Windchildren died of pure misery. For she liked him too well to lose him, so she did not seem to make it too hard on him and only gave him light chores, and treated him like a rare collectors' item. He did not have to cook dinner, for she knew it would sicken him. Windchildren

did not eat, just drank pure water, preferable rain, which she served during his special visits. The wind and rain contained all for them.

He just brought her food and kept her company on her request while she ate her light meals of strange fruits and vegetables to keep her body fit to help her spell work. She loved to have him around her, as she loved to be surrounded by beauty. Sometimes, she would want to hear him sing, his voice was rich and could reach notes high and low. He guessed she was mild to him partly because he was rare here in the cave, and perhaps she felt proud of having him – once a free spirit – now captured and all for herself. One thing was certain; she adored and cherished him and often called him ‘my darling’. In a way she did care for him. Perhaps that kept him going too; to be wanted.

Despite the admiration of the powerful woman who worked in mysterious ways and her spell she held on him, Dashim was still strong enough to miss the wind and his freedom. Only when he was with her, did he forget all about his former life. She was the air and wind for him now, even if she was demanding and sometimes a little bizarre.

~ ~ ~

The evening was cold in the harsh open mountainous terrain, and it was hard to find a suitable place to make camp. The rough wind was blowing constantly now and made their heads heavy and their ears ring. The two women had only found a small stream of water; barely enough to wash themselves in, but enough to satisfy their thirst with. The muck on their clothes had dried and movement proved difficult with every step they took.

They ate some leaves from a plant Tirsaknew was edible. It barely filled their stomachs, though. Tired, hungry and dirty they lay down beside a huge rock to hide from the ever-present wind.

Artride shivered underneath her moist blanket and tried to ignore the annoying itch she felt all over her skin, and stared at the cloudy dark sky; occasionally she could see stars in the distance. The wind was rustling along the tall grass and felt cold and unwelcome. She was very silent and Tirsa felt she had to do something to lighten up her mood. But how?

‘Did you know I have a sister?’ Tirsa started with chattering teeth close beside her, still gazing at the passing clouds and stars. They hadn’t been able to find wood to make a campfire, so instead they lay quite close to each other with their moist blankets wrapped around them tightly.

‘I remember you mentioned her, yes,’ The queen remarked with a tiny dull voice; obviously she was tired, but didn’t want to be rough with her bodyguard.

‘We always camped together until she left the house to start her own travels. She used to tell me amazing stories in the evening. She was very much like a mother to me, my mother always being a bit locked up in her own world.’ *And grief.*

‘Is she much older than you?’

‘Four years, and she was the best and dearest friend I had during my childhood. She taught me a great deal and we shared our secrets.’ She could feel Artride smiling, although she could only see her pale face dimly in the little light the stars gave; her midnight blue eyes sparkling like stars themselves.

After a short silence the queen said, ‘Please go on Tirsa.’

‘Well, I just sort of miss her, now more than ever, perhaps because you remind me a little of her. I somehow feel she is close; silly huh?’

So she sees me as a sister? Well, that is certainly an improvement.

‘I feel honoured, Tirsa,’ she said gravely. ‘I never had any sister or brother, so I value friendships even more. I was a very lonely child; even

though there were always people surrounding me. Mostly servants, nannies, teachers; but no one I could feel at ease with or relate to, but my father.’ And as she suddenly realised she did not want to talk about herself, she added, ‘So tell me, where does your sister live these days?’

‘Last time I saw her was about three years ago when my mother turned ‘half a century’, and at that time she was heading for Oecandria in the north, so I assume she has settled down there.’

‘Three years? That is a long time.’

Tirsa sighed and agreed.

‘She doesn’t even know what happened to me in the meantime and what is happening right now, and to her brother.’ She realised she was no part of her life anymore. That saddened her.

It was like Artride read her mind when she asked, ‘Maybe she will head for Ceartas when she finds out about Elimar.’

‘Oh, I am sure she will, *if* she hears the news, but that’s hardly likely.’ And she shrugged and pulled the fabric closer to her body. Artride felt her shivering and wanted desperately to put her arms around her.

‘Did she not have the ambition to become a knight herself?’

‘No, she is very much a free spirit and doesn’t want to belong to any organisation or have any strings attached, and besides, she didn’t see our father get killed. She could always distance herself more than I could and she had already left home when those knights from Ceartas came along to fill my head with all those adventures.’ She paused and laughed silently. ‘My mother would surely have had a heart attack if both of her daughters had become warriors.’

It felt good to hear the light, pleasant laugh of Artride close to her ears. It warmed her all over.

‘Well, I can imagine the fear of your mother. Her husband, after all, had been a warrior and was slain, and I am sure he didn’t choose to live his life far away from civilisation for nothing?’

‘Hmm, he did not tell much about his warrior past ... well I was just a small child then, but my mother told me about the nightmares he had the first years they spent together when he just left the army. He just wanted to forget.’

‘Do you think he would have warned you not to join?’

That was a hard question for her and she had to think about it for a while.

Quietly she responded, ‘I think he would have, but I doubt I would have listened at the time. I didn’t listen to my mother either.’

A short silence followed.

‘I bet your father would have been very proud of you.’ *Is proud.* Tirsia corrected in her mind.

‘And your mother must be too.’

‘I named my horse after her.’

‘After your mother?’

‘No, after my sister; Fiosa.’

‘Funny, why?’

‘Same attitude; stubborn and a will of her own.’

‘You might as well have called her ‘Tirsia’ then.’

She giggled at that, and Artride fell in and they laughed together for a while.

When they fell silent again, Tirsia had the feeling the tension was broken and dared to ask, ‘Did you never miss a mother?’

It sounded so kind and honest it gave the queen a sudden warmth in her heart and stomach. It took her some time before she could answer. ‘I

do not really know what it is like to have a mother other than the cool old nannies I had while I grew up. As you perhaps know, she died when she gave birth to me. My father was a mother and a father to me. He gave me everything he could. I always believed I was the luckiest child there was with such a loving and caring father until my eighteenth birthday and I was trained for Queen.'

Tirsa nodded. 'I understand, but even so. A man cannot replace a woman entirely. The love is the same, but a woman needs another woman during her growing up to compare herself with, as a boy needs a father figure.'

'You are right. I sort of missed the real women in my life and realised when I was about sixteen I was searching for a surrogate mother in my older personal servants. The nannies I had until twelve were horrible and I often complained about them, but I guess my father was right not to spoil me with a soothing and kind nanny.'

'He never found a new wife, did he?'

'No, it wasn't in the law book, but even so, he could not. He often told me he had experienced true love with my mother and felt like betraying her even in death if he would remarry.'

'Did he tell you what she was like?'

She heard her smiling when she answered, 'She was patient, caring and sensitive. My father often told me even if she would have survived giving birth to me she still would not have made it through the harsh time to come. She was never strong. She always carried the weight of the world upon herself.'

'You take more after your father then.' But Tirsa rapidly added, 'Not that you are not caring, patient and sensitive, on the contrary. I mean, you are the strongest person I have ever met.'

‘Thank you, Tirsa. I do not know if I am all that strong, but thank you even so.’

‘What exactly happened when you turned eighteen?’ she asked after a moment.

Artride stretched her feet underneath the blanket.

‘Ah, my training for queen. My father missed my mother greatly at that time, because I was not so easy to handle, and then there was the fact about the curse on the book and his daughter he was placing this burden on. It all became too much for him really. I did realise why the training was necessary and all, but still found it very hard to let go of my old carefree perfect little life. You see, the thought of becoming queen didn’t occupy my mind that much before, that was later and far away. I lived in a world of my own where everything was right and pleasant; no injustice or evil existed there. Until I was eighteen I was sheltered mostly from the inhabitants I was obliged to rule at some point. I only knew the people of the castle.’

Her voice became sharper. ‘I always hated all the attention and adoration. I did not understand why I deserved all that in my naive thinking. What had I ever done to prove myself worthy yet? Nothing. It was just the name and my rank. So it did not make sense to me. I felt very ... isolated. The higher the pedestal they put you on, the deeper the fall.’

Tirsa understood that very well. She had experienced something similar. She had lived under a lot of high expectations and stress after her first recognition. And how could she ever live up to the stories spread about her? The difference between them, however, was that Tirsa never worried about those things. She never cared for fame or much how other people thought about her, Artride did.

‘The fall was indeed hard when the people found out I wasn’t their hope and pride.’

‘It’s hard for them to put their finger on you, to judge you fairly. Just be patient with yourself and them.’

She felt Artride slightly move herself to lay in a more comfortable position on her back, with her legs bent a little.

‘Who helped you with your new role?’

‘Not an awful lot of people. Gradolf left to join Volmer, which I was not sorry about, but I was left on my own to choose my own mentors. I did not even have the time to feel sorry for myself. It was either swim or drown, and I had to learn that rapidly. I tried to swim ... I still do.’

‘I think you are doing a fine job so far. The best you can, considered the circumstances.’

Artride found herself thinking back about how angry Tirsa was when she first met her. She didn’t think so then. But that was before she knew the truth. *The truth ...*

‘You are just trying to be kind with me. Being a queen does not suit me and often I find myself living a lie. I was not meant to be queen; a non-person without feelings. It does not feel right to stand above anyone and rule over another person’s life, let alone an entire country.’ She sighed deeply before she continued, ‘Oh, I have learned that a country needs organisation, otherwise chaos will rule and strife will emerge among the people, but I feel it can be done in another way.’

‘How?’ Tirsa was all ears.

‘Well,’ she suddenly spoke excitedly and rapidly, ‘we should gather a high delegation; chosen people from all the counties – instead of the counts that rule now that bought their way to the top. Together these caring people can make new rules for Ceartas; approved by all the people through

honest selections. I have accepted the fact that I have certain obligations, fame and expectations, but I want to act instead of follow; I guess what you would expect from a true leader. I want to mean something for the people, use my role wisely and help them. I do not want to be a tool anymore. I want to be close to the people to understand their needs. We should go hand in hand to begin to understand each other. The distance there is now must vanish. '

'That is really modern, if I may say so.' Tirsa had heard about those systems in far away countries. Compared to them Ceartas was still so primitive. It surprised her in a pleasant way the queen was thinking this way.

'You may,' Artride laughed. 'But I hope we can keep this between us. If someone finds out before the curse is destroyed ...'

'Why worry? The people would like your ideas, I am sure of that.'

'You think so?'

'I know so. Many are against the current system, but are afraid to act because of their fear for harsh measures.'

'Hmm, it's just that I am used to keeping secrets. It has grown my second nature.'

She is definitely honest with me now! 'Well, if you care to know, I for one like your plan and truly hope it will be a reality someday.'

'Yes, someday ...' she dreamily repeated before her voice became steady again, 'And we haven't even found the realm of this sorceress yet, and it has already been a week since we started our journey.'

'Well,' Tirsa responded solemnly and she lay down as well, 'I feel we are getting closer.'

CHAPTER 11

ROAD TO TEMPTATION

*Better the long clean road,
Than the short dirty road.*

Gaelic proverb

A sharp pain hit Artride in her bare face. Another cold gust of wind blew past her from the high Ice Mountains. Nothing was able to grow here and the air was not only getting colder, but thinner and therefore harder to breathe. Her woollen cloak was not entirely windproof, but normally held most cold outside. This surely was the worst cold she had ever felt before. And she knew cold; she had sought it intentionally when she was eighteen; trying to feel closer to nature and harden herself so she could endure the time to come better, she figured, thinking back at her lonely strolls through the winter woods surrounding Tarac with only a thin silken dress on her bare body, while all the other inhabitants were warm inside by the comforting fires.

She had almost grown numb to the cold outside, indeed, but that was all; whatever else people said. She was not a cold heartless person, although she had started to believe it herself soon after she had watched the first criminal on his way to the executioner who was about to behead him. He had killed a Ceartasian soldier for offending and ravaging his only daughter. For soldiers it was allowed to take the woman of an enemy without any punishment from the book, but the woman had been Ceartasian. The soldier, therefore, would have had to face his sentence, but the father had not thought about that and was faster with his own wrath, more's the pity. She thought back at the helpless feeling of rage she had

felt, even though her father had tried to teach her not to get involved, and told her to let her guards handle all the crimes and penalties; like he always did. *“Use your precious time in finding a way to destroy the book. The longer you wait, the more suffering to both you and the people. When you have found a cure, you can explain and then they will understand, before that time come it is just painfully wasted time. You cannot change the sentences, nor can you turn back time; so it will do no good.”*

People had spoken ill of him, as well; Macdin the Mouse they had called him, but at least they knew he did not enjoy it. They just believed he was a coward and that he cherished his background with its Holy Book and feared the evil spirits of his ancestors; especially that of King Oleva the Great. The people of Ceartas were quite superstitious and seemed to accept that. Because Artride was more involved and actually spoke to her people, like no king or queen had ever done before in their kingdom, but not for the reasons her people believed, she was often thought of as cruel. Even her father had obeyed the unwritten rule to keep his distance and did not speak to the relatives of the sentenced ones. He simply said to them, ‘What’s done is done. You know the rules, alas. So be it.’ When he advised her to do the same, she had resented him, but now she understood. It would have eaten him alive, like it did her. He had warned her though, but she wouldn’t listen.

Artride had asked him why King Oleva had trusted such a sorcerer like Kromdan, but Macdin could only tell her what he was told by his father, for almost no records were held, other than stories of victory and glory. King Oleva had wanted to be immortal, mighty and obeyed beyond reason and he thought that this was the ideal way to achieve that. No children of his would replace him after his death and change his ‘marvelous’ rules. No, they would be powerless and had to admit that only

he was the true King of Ceartas, into eternity. But the fool had forgotten to thank the one who made it all possible, poor old Kromdan, and now Oleva's offspring had indeed to live with his thoughtless negligence even today; over two centuries past his death.

Going over things in her mind, trying to ignore the freezing pain she had never felt before, like the frost was climbing into her bones and her blood, and was trying to find a way into her heart, she said out loud, 'I will never be like you, Oleva!' Tirsa had not heard above the raging wind.

Tarac was not all that cold for a castle; all the fireplaces built in every room had proved to be very effective indeed; although all the fires had to be maintained by the loyal servants all day.

She wrapped her cloak around her shivering body tighter, but it had little effect.

Tirsa was even worse off; as a hardened practical knight, a cloak would only get in the way during battle; in this kind of terrain they would wear heavy woollen tunics, but the swamp had destroyed her only one and the rest of her clothes. Instead, she used her blanket knotted under her chin, flapping behind her like wings of a maddening bird. With every step she made her feet felt like wooden shoes, even though she had wrapped them up in pieces of woollen cloth; ripped off her spare muddy clothes. Her hair flapped around as well and flew like golden treads in the growing wind, which now contained small flocks of snow; hard and sharp like the mountains itself.

They had been walking continuously for hours, Tirsa at the front; trying to cross these mountains somehow; climbing and descending several rocky ridges, covered with centuries of compact icy snow. And fresh snow was falling out of the sky, whirling about them, and over the ground like smoke when they thought they had had the worst.

The wind blew too hard to communicate, so they pointed and gestured to one another where to go next and next ...

Their limbs grew slowly numb and painless and they did not dare to rest; afraid they would freeze at the spot, with their feet attached firmly to the ice, and they would stand like statues, never to be found again.

But what was the most frightening was that the howling wind started to form words; while at first they thought it was their own imagination playing tricks on them, they started to be able to make out their names clearly.

Artride tried to cover her ears, but Tirsa decided it wasn't that fearsome at all. The voices calling their names sounded soothing and kind, and it appeared more like a question to Tirsa than teasing or mean, like she expected at first. And they kept repeating their names.

'What?' Artride shouted annoyed at the voices, but Tirsa was calmer and asked, 'Who are you? If you are Windchildren, please help us. If this is some hindering from the sorceress leave us at peace, we mean no harm! Or else guide us to your home.'

'Heeeelp.' The voices responded in chorus. It sounded more like a plea than a confirmation.

Both women stared at each other through the continuous, falling snow, which stung and hurt their eyes like numerous small knives.

'I think they are Windchildren!' Tirsa shouted at Artride, whose face showed incomprehension.

At that moment the wind caught Tirsa's improvised cloak and it flew high in circles on the gust of wind. She tried to grab it, but missed. The cold wind was blowing right through her leather breeches and woollen surcoat. They hadn't expected this kind of weather at all in springtime; not

even in the mountains ... well, not in the friendly mountains they were used to.

Artride got hold of her hand and gestured her to follow. Holding each other's hands tightly, so they wouldn't lose each other in the snow blizzard, they set their feet in the calf-deep snow and trotted on. Dragging themselves forward, leaning, pushing and pulling, urging and encouraging the other. They had no idea in what direction they went, but as Tirsa had suggested; they followed their instinct. And time went by ...

Until ... the snow ceased to fall.

The heavy clouds cleared and opened themselves, and the wind lay down to be replaced by a comfortable summer breeze. *A summer breeze?* they wondered simultaneously.

They were still in the snow-capped mountains, higher up than they imagined, as they could see the surrounding view of lower blue-grey mountains, their peaks dwelling in layers of mist. It was still cold, or perhaps they were, but everything looked different. No sign of snow, other than that on their clothes and in their hair. The queen glanced back to find her sight covered in mist.

'Ah, never look back, lady,' she heard a soft voice announce, while she had the strange sensation of being watched. She glimpsed at Tirsa to see if she had heard it as well. She was startled by the expression on her face as she started to look around.

No one. No snow, no wind, no voices, just plain old mountains, like nothing had ever happened.

Then, for no apparent reason, Tirsa's eyes caught something green between the wet, pale blue-grey rocks covered with brownish moss and a fine white layer of melting snow. A bright green, like new leaves of a fern. However, it didn't seem to fit in here.

She walked towards it carefully, and discovered a plant with big leaves, she wasn't familiar with.

‘Do not touch it, Tirsa,’ Artride warned, coming to stand next to her. ‘Remember what Roalda said, not to trust anything we do not know.’

Tirsa only nodded and looked up to find more of those big leafed, luscious green plants a few footsteps away. Artride followed her and the more they walked, the greener it got; also beneath their feet, grass appeared and tiny flowers popped up, and more pretty plants and small bushes with big leaves. The flowers they now saw were bigger with gorgeous shapes, almost like mouths and bells; reddish and deep blue, and they spread a lovely fresh scent that you couldn't get enough of. It enlightened their mood. Huge butterflies, brighter and more colourful than they had ever seen, flew from one to the other, and when Artride got nearer she noticed them drinking with large delicate tongues like needles, from the rich and sweet nectar they provided. They also spotted berries at the bushes, red and blue, but they had never seen such before and left them alone, with watering mouths and growling stomachs.

When they stopped walking they gazed around to draw in the profusion of colours, it was like ending up in a beautiful dream you did not want to wake up from; a colourful – but mostly green – small valley welcomed them warmly, yes warmly, for indeed the temperature had risen comfortably; not too hot and not too cold.

The Magical Land, pleasant for once, Artride thought smiling, and she glanced over to her companion who had a suspicious and wary look on her face, to tell by her narrowed eyes.

Artride walked further while the soft grass cherished her boots; still wet from the melted snow. They did not recognize the trees which grew there with their soft reddish brown bark and twisted smooth branches

with again big green leaves. Small streams of clear, green-blue water, ran over small round pebbles between the slender grass, bright and clear like crystals. Tirsa picked one up, a violet one, and when she looked in it she saw another world; another paradise, like this one. Startled she dropped it and it landed among the other pebbles, which doubtless held the same wonders. She had an urge to pick one up again to look and dream away, until she realized she was in a little paradise herself, right here, right now. The streams ended in a broader babbling brook; flowing through a tumble of bigger boulders and it was clearing their thoughts comfortably. The sun had appeared from behind the clouds; clouds which were entirely gone now. A clear blue sky was upon them again. She had forgotten about Artride for a moment, who sat down on a rock a few feet away, warming her face in the sunlight with closed eyes. She looked so serene with her clear, unwrinkled young skin, her peach mouth and her oval face framed with black hair, which had a reddish glow upon it, exposed as she had been to the wind and now the sun. If Tirsa hadn't known any better she would guess she belonged here; among the green and fresh pure things. She was made of the same material.

They needed to rest, and from out of nowhere here it was; their camp. It was more than they could ever hope for. Tirsa sat on another rock next to the queen and warmed herself as well. The rock didn't feel hard, but smoother and softer than any pillow.

They held their tongues, for it would certainly disturb the peace of this place. And what words were needed right now other than sighs of astonishment and wonder?

What remained, however, were their growling stomachs and dry mouths, next to their heavy limbs and strained muscles, which had tightened themselves in the cold, and they ached all over.

There was fruit here, and water, but could they touch it? Would it be safe?

In answer a small rustling of leaves was to be heard as a tiny head popped up between the big leaves of a bush. It was the head of a young girl in her teens, smiling at them with glittering bright green eyes, green as fresh grass. Her skin was of a darker forest green and her long straight hair clear blue, like the colour of the stream in this little valley.

She rose from her knees and carefully approached light-footed. The two women quickly glanced at one another. Artride appeared more startled than Tirsa, for she recognized a Woodchild in the girl which she quickly whispered to Artride.

‘My welcome to both of you,’ the girl said pleasantly, with a small accent.

‘Hello,’ Artride spoke with a trembling voice.

The girl bowed. ‘A pleasure meeting a queen. My name is Shanta and this is my home.’

‘Oh, how nice to make your acquaintance. How do you know I am a queen?’

The girl smiled mildly while her eyes sparkled like one of the crystals. ‘News goes around quickly here.’

‘Hello, Shanta,’ Tirsa introduced herself, placing her right hand over her heart. ‘Tirsa Lathabris, bodyguard of the queen. Carahoose meanta hinthe, Shanta.’

Artride stared questionably at her while Shanta’s eyes narrowed, and for a brief moment she stopped smiling, before her face was bright again and happy. ‘Carehoose meanta hinthe, Tirsa. My ... you know our language.’

‘So, now that we are properly introduced,’ Artride began feeling a little left out, but kind of safe now she knew Tirsa was familiar with these kind of creatures. It was her first encounter with a Woodchild, which were rare in the woods of Ceartas. ‘How come that this place is so wonderful and luscious, while just a few feet away it’s cold and windy?’

Shanta slanted her head a little. She looked like a youth, but her eyes and charisma were that of someone a lot older. ‘I have kept it this way. The Green Valley used to be so much bigger, before the weather changed years ago,’ she sadly said.

‘The work of the sorceress who lives here?’ Tirsa asked. Shanta bowed her head. ‘My valley has changed, but I do not know why. A disturbance in the land. My magic is limited and I need all my power to keep this place healthy. You see, I will cease to exist too if it turns into ice, like the rest of the mountain; ice and snow, stones and ugly moss and bare sandy ground where nothing wants to grow.’

The queen thought about that and came to the conclusion that in her world it was rather odd to have such a green valley so high up in the mountains with its thin air and always present wind. But this was Dochas; The Magical Land. ‘But you do not know why this happens?’ she asked again.

Shanta slowly shook her head and suddenly smiled. ‘Where are my manners? You must be thirsty and hungry. My valley provides everything you need.’ And she reached for both of their hands and grasped them, pulling the women gently off to a bush with tasty looking purple berries; soft and juicy. She began picking them and handed two handfuls over to them. Artride just stared at the fruit and felt reluctant to eat, and she looked at Tirsa who looked doubtful as well, but nodded, whispering, ‘It

should be alright, I mean, she is a Woodchild. I have never met more honest folk.'

Only when they saw Shanta eating her share of berries with taste, did Artride and Tirsa follow her example. She showed them a nice place to sit at the brook and began to fill three crystal goblets with the juice of one of those lovely huge flowers. The liquid was a soft pale orange.

Tirsa put her feet in the cool, but relaxing stream. Artride felt a little ashamed of pulling off her boots, afraid her feet would smell, so she left her boots on, looking longingly at her companion's' feet.

When they had their share and their stomachs were most satisfyingly filled, they felt strong and fit like never before.

'It's just like one of those riddles we solved; the one about the paradise and being wealthy,' Artride whispered to Tirsa. She nodded thoughtfully.

'Magical, Shanta?' Tirsa asked pointing at the empty goblets.

'Isn't everything?' she reflected, but it was more a statement than a question.

Tirsa smiled. 'Yes, but I have a feeling that Dochas reveals a different kind of magic, now that this sorceress does her things. Most Woodchildren hide themselves, afraid of the sorceress, who captured a lot of you, so I have heard. That would mean much magic would be lost as well, replaced by hers, is that true?'

Shanta remained firm. 'I do not now of those things. All I know is that my valley is threatened.'

'I see,' Tirsa remarked quietly, gazing around. 'That is indeed a shame.'

'If this goes on it would be the end!' she remarked hotly.

She studied the girl; who looked really frightened. ‘And the end of you as well...’

The Woodchild nodded sadly.

‘Will you help me?’ she asked suddenly, staring at them with big eyes.

‘Saving your valley, how?’ Artride remarked.

Shanta cheerfully sprang up, light and quick as a fish and gestured them to follow her.

They crossed another grassy meadow and walked past bigger trees and an inviting pond. *I could do with a bath*, Artride thought, with her skin itching underneath her clothes, running a hand through her hair. She led them to a wall of yellow rock where she stopped. ‘Look.’ The women did and saw the yellow was not a rock, but thick solid ice; a frozen waterfall. Yellow from melting and freezing again. The ice was carved in marvellous natural shapes, mostly round with big hanging droops of white and yellow ice, almost transparent. Tirsa imagined it could be a palace for a small fairy ice queen.

‘The only thing frozen in here, permanently,’ Shanta explained.

‘But it is beautiful,’ Artride announced.

‘It is, but something unnatural has caused it to stay frozen, no matter how hard I try to thaw it out with my magic. It could well be that sorceress you mentioned.’

Artride looked up when she mentioned the sorceress. It was clear she knew nothing about her, or so it seemed.

‘But why want to thaw it?’

‘Because it is not natural. Tirsa, you understand don’t you?’ she asked sweetly.

She frowned. 'I do, nature didn't intend to have this waterfall stay frozen all the time, I reckon, but I wonder what she gains by doing this.'

'Maybe it is to pester me. She must know I still have my magic. I feel – I *know* that it's only the beginning. In a few years from now my powers will completely weaken and then my entire valley will freeze with me in it; for I will never leave it. I was born here and my duty is to care for the valley until my last day.' Woodchildren could age up to four centuries. 'If you help me; you will have more than my greatest gratitude.'

'Why do you think we can do anything at all, and how?' Artride asked uncertainly.

'You are foreigners. I have figured out that only those who were not born here are able to defrost the waterfall.'

'How do you know of these things, and not know anything about the sorceress?'

A little stressed she replied to Artride, 'My inner voice told me. I am a Truthteller of the heart. My TalamhClann heart cannot defrost it, but my inner all-knowing voice told me only a human heart can. And no humans live here.' The TalamhClann were in fact the Woodchildren in their tongue.

'Alright,' Tirsa began nodding, and she turned to Artride. 'I have heard of Truthtellers, they can read your mind, tell slightly about your past and future, and foresee things. Not all Woodchildren are telepaths; but those who are belong to the wisest and most respected.'

'How do you know they are telling the truth?' Artride whispered.

Tirsa smiled. 'Oh, you just do. Especially when they tell you things no one else can possibly know.' And she winked at her and said in a conspiring tone, 'Like secrets, for one.'

Artride blushed shyly at that, to the surprise of Tirsa who misinterpreted it.

I already know hers; so why be afraid? Shanta can't be harmed by knowing about the curse, can she? Tirsa wondered.

'The remaining question is,' Artride quickly asked Shanta, 'how? Of course we want to help you if we can, but you don't actually want our hearts, do you?'

Shanta seemed happy again. 'Just your heart's desires, and my waterfall will warm up and defrost, and remain unfrozen for at least a couple of years again; hopefully longer.'

'You mean like our hopes and dreams?' Tirsa asked and Artride glanced from Shanta to Tirsa questionably. It seemed Tirsa had not heard about this before.

'Yes, but I'd rather call them heart's desires, for that is what they really are. You do not have to be afraid. Your secrets are safe with me,' she assured them. 'No humans ever come here anyway; well, the last one I saw was about eighty years ago and he froze to death.'

The queen shrugged, her eyes grew big and Shanta laughed. 'Not here in my valley, but outside. It had already started then. You had a lucky escape to find my valley and I am so happy you came along; I would have had to wait for ages again.'

'Do you live here, all by yourself?'

Shanta widened her green slim arms and joyfully announced, 'A Woodchild is never lonely. And I am not the only spirit here.' And she glanced at the butterflies and trees. Woodchildren could communicate with anything alive, Tirsa knew. They cared for all life, and gave it their love and attention.

‘But you are the only Woodchild here, aren’t you?’ Tirsa asked. Shanta brushed it off by shrugging her shoulders nonchalantly, jumping on a purple rock glittering in the sun. ‘Like I said; I am not lonely.’ She did look content, Tirsa had to admit.

The two women exchanged looks, and stepped a little closer to discuss it further.

‘Our heart’s desires?’ Artride started cynically; keeping her voice level, so that Shanta didn’t hear. ‘I feel sorry for her waterfall and her valley, but could this be another trick of the sorceress? We are after all close now, hearing this story proves that.’

‘It would be too obvious for that, wouldn’t it? I mean, you would think so. Anyone would. And by giving our inner thoughts away, well, I admit we would be vulnerable and the sorceress probably would get to know us. If she has this place under her spell, she will. Maybe that’s the whole idea, and why and what is wrong with that anyway? She could just invite us or guide us to her if she wants that. And if she would want us dead, I am sure she could harm us. But Shanta? I mean; she seems sincere, Artride.’

‘She could be held here against her will,’ Artride pondered. ‘And hired to trick us.’ She drew in a deep breath and glanced around. ‘This place seems so unnatural in a way.’

‘Yes, but it does make me curious,’ Tirsa announced a little naughtily. ‘Our hearts’ desires. I know mine, but ... to know yours ... And what harm could it do anyway?’ she did of course consider any threat to their lives and their quest, but really didn’t see any, save for a little time. She trusted the Woodchildren completely; otherwise she would have been just as suspicious as Artride about this. *We’ll be on our way soon enough.*

The Woodchildren helped me countless times; this would be a way to thank them, after all those years ...

‘Do not be ridiculous, Tirsa,’ she retorted sharply. ‘You already know mine. I trust she will tell us both the same; our true desire is a counter spell for the curse. I could just tell her that right now.’ And briskly she stepped over to Shanta and told her that. Shanta smiled at her. ‘It is of most importance that we find her, Shanta,’ she concluded.

‘Kind of you to share that with me, Queen Artride; however, we will have to prepare a ritual and *I* will tell *you* your desire. Could very well be what you just told me.’ *Or something else ...* Artride bit her lip at that.

‘Believe me ... some people do not know themselves that well, or if they do, they mostly don’t dare to share it, and only with help from me will they see and acknowledge their true desires. Countless times Truthtellers helped others take a different path in their lives. But if you know yourself, well ... you can stay on yours, can’t you?’ And she smiled sweetly. ‘Really, this is harmless. It’s just opening up to me and I will see through you. I will be helping you and you will be helping me.’

Artride didn’t want to show her fear to her companion and pulled herself together. *Well, I know myself and what I want, so why worry?*

‘You really do not know a woman named—’ and Tirsa stepped closer towards Shanta to whisper in her ear to be on the safe side; remembering all too well what Roalda had said about the power of calling her name out loud and the attention it would draw. ‘Sempervirens?’ Shanta remained firm and did not show any sign that she did, but then again a Woodchild could play tricks on you; mostly funny games, but – to the experience of Tirsa – only innocent, harmless little magical tricks such as whispers in the woods or laughing to scare you or throw pineapples at your back. Sometimes, they would even make you get lost in their woods, by

leading you off a track that would otherwise lead to something special in their eyes, what is not meant for the eyes of humans. They had trusted Tirsa in her childhood days and she had befriended some. It was hard to get to know them well, for they were always busy with something, and could run away in the middle of a conversation; off to care for a bird in distress or a wounded mouse or mole. Their hearing was superb as were most of their senses. Animals were their best friends and Tirsa felt proud she once had been to, and even learned their language a little. They could speak in the tongue of humans as well; living always close to them, but avoiding the noisy clumsy creatures as often as possible. However, they would not lie to you about big issues like this, and never about something serious like Mindreading.

‘And if we do not help you?’ Artride dared to ask; risking losing Tirsa’s sympathy, who obvious had a soft spot for the Woodchildren. *Presumable they remind her of the woods in her homeland.*

Shanta looked disappointed at the queen and then at the frozen waterfall. Her eyes were really mournful now. She sat down with her elbows resting on her knees, still staring at the still ice.

‘I mean ... I am sorry that this is happening to your valley, but our quest is really important and we have to get going –’ *So, is she really a cold-hearted person when it comes to it?* Tirsa thought and looked incredulously at her.

‘I just do not want to endanger it; many lives are at stake, do you understand?’

‘Artride—’ Tirsa whispered. ‘I know that you’re in charge here and I will submit to anything you decide, and above all I want you to be safe, but do you really feel this is perilous for our quest?’

‘I have to be on the safe side, Tirsa, too much is at stake. And after all we are given a choice here. This is still The Magical Land and we cannot trust anything even ... your friend over here,’ she added more softly.

‘It is true,’ Tirsa admitted, ‘that according to Roalda, some Wood- and Windchildren have been abducted, and for all we know she could be one of them, instructed to fool us, but I honestly don’t believe Shanta knows about the whole thing. All she cares for is her valley. I know these delicate, honest creatures; they will never let themselves be used for a mean trick by another, especially not human and not even a sorceress, how powerful she may be.’

‘But what if it concerns her valley and she signed some pact with her? We do have to be aware of every possibility.’

‘Hmm,’ and she sighed reluctantly, running a free hand through her loose, a little greasy-feeling hair.

‘Fact remains that we spill precious time arguing about this, Artride. You have to decide now.’

What harm can it do indeed? Artride did ponder and she found herself drawn to look at the luscious green valley with its butterflies and flowers. *They would die too if she tells the truth, and what if she does –* She had to admit she was curious about this as well, even though it were her own heart’s desires – how embarrassing – and Tirsa’s, now that could be interesting.

‘How long will this take, Shanta?’

‘Only a few heartbeats, about three hundred.’

Artride seemed to melt and nodded. ‘Alright ... let’s begin.’

~ ~ ~

Shanta sat in front of the two women with her eyes locked onto Artride. They had installed themselves in a comfortable position with their legs crossed underneath them and their backs leaning against the soft rock by the gleaming fresh pond. The grass felt cool and lovely against their hands and a mild gust of wind blew past them, leaving them at ease and relaxed.

The Truthteller was completely focusing on the queen; her mind piercing through her aura, ignoring her outer beauty; just her true self was important now, and Shanta would only see that, like all Woodchildren saw only the soul.

And then only after a short moment she began to tell:

‘I see that you have been given a heavy task at a young age; a burden weighing grievously on you. The task to rule people. Something powerful is holding you back though ... yes ... the Law book of your country. You feel like you have no say in the matter. Being powerless frustrates you deeply. Your desire is ... to rule; to control without being held back.’ She smiled sweetly at Artride saying, ‘But of course you already told me this much. ‘However ... I do not see the curse you mentioned, none ... whatsoever.’

That startled Artride and she frowned, shaking her head, saying, ‘Of course there wouldn’t be for that is my desire.’

‘No, I am reading the truth now.’

‘What? What truth; that there is no curse right now?’

Shanta only smiled oddly. ‘There is only one truth really.’

‘But if that is so; we can go home.’ She wanted to stand.

‘I am telling you how it is and already ... was, according to my reading.’

‘Already was? What are you suggesting; that there never *was* a curse? You are a bit vague about what it is you are exactly doing.’

Tirsa stared at Artride who was getting more than upset. *Why?*

‘Please do not ask questions or disturb me, or I will loose contact,’ Shanta explained drowsily.

You have kept it hidden from everyone. You have many secrets.’

That is the truth. Tirsa had to admit, and no desire.

‘You have conflicting needs between privacy and passion. You want to truly rule and experience true power. But on the other hand you want to run away and to be left alone. Since the first is no option your true quest is to explore Dochas and find a suitable place to make your home and leave your worries behind. You have taken courses in how to build your own house, how to stay alive in the wilderness, how to cultivate a small piece of land and care for it and so on. You hired Tirsa to protect and guide you until you have found your new home, after that you plan to cleverly set up your own death; so that your people believe you had an accident. Only then you presume you will be entirely free; free of the book, free of worries and free of your people.’

Artride raised one eyebrow and her mouth had slowly fallen open with each new claim. She swallowed hard and suddenly shook her head violently with wide-open eyes. ‘This is nonsense! It is my desire, sort of, I admit, but nothing more, you make it sound as if it’s the truth!’ Artride almost yelled and shot fierce glances from Shanta to Tirsa, who had a questioning look in her eyes. *It is only half-true!* Artride thought in despair.

Tirsa’s mind was raging. Could this be the truth after all and not a desire? A Woodchild is always telling the truth when it comes to Truthtelling, or whatever this is; hidden desires, hidden truths – only separated from one another until they are carried out. There was no curse in the first place, that could be a desire and Artride escaping to find a safe

haven ... well she did show some signs of wanting to leave the weight of the responsibility behind, but who would not, considering what she was going through? Nevertheless, she did not really plan to do this all ahead, did she? Maybe it became useful I came along ... No ... It can't be true, can it? Moreover, if there is no curse and she would want to rule, why would she still want to run away? She is entitled to have her own heart's desires, even if she lied to me. It is her second nature, she told me ... perhaps warned me.

‘This is what my inner voice tells, Artride, as for you Tirsas—’

‘Hold on,’ Artride snapped. ‘To run away is perhaps my desire, but you are making it sound like I planned it for real. There is a big difference in that. I know what it is, but tell me what you are doing. You said you would tell us our desires and then all of a sudden, you are mixing truth with fiction. That means you have been lying to us or mixing things up, which is very confusing. Do we have to guess what is what ourselves?’

‘I am already focusing on Tirsas, for this is taking a lot of energy,’ Shanta dryly announced.

Artride and Tirsas exchanged a quick alarmed glance; not knowing what to think.

‘Tirsas ... your life is burdened with many losses,’ *Truth*. Artride thought. ‘Your whole life is a struggle, focused on revenge; trying to win back your happiness ... You are not really what people think you are. Outsiders only see what they want to see. Secrets again ...

All true. Tirsas thought. And no desires there ...

‘The one that matters now is that you have your mind on something else other than this quest of the queen ... Your imprisoned brother's life, you figured, will most likely be spared if the queen is dead and buried. You have never believed in a curse. You believe it is just a lie, like the rest

and the true mission of the queen is to run away.’ Shanta looked up and added, ‘Well, seems that you were right about that, Tirsa.’

Tirsa’s face was white as a blanket, shaking her head with a defiant look. No.

‘Shanta,’ Artride started to say in an uneasy voice, but the girl smiled and looked happily at the waterfall which was indeed slowly defrosting in answer to the women’s hearts’ desires; water was dripping from the solid ice and underneath, melting slowly, drop by drop.

‘It works! It actually works!’ Shanta shouted out in pure joy and she jumped up and down, dancing in circles. Her joy would have affected the two women, were it not for the things she had said about them; which were not only desires at all, but some sort of deception. Because both of them knew at least some of it to be true of their own reading, and some of it to be a vague thought or desire. Desires or truth, they were more focused on the other; how much of what Shanta told was true, and what was not? Artride knew her desire was to flee and the thought indeed had crossed her mind countless times ... until Tirsa came along. And yes Tirsa had thought about killing the queen when she heard about the death sentence of her brother ... until she met her in person and learned about the curse story; which she indeed didn’t believe in the beginning, thinking it was another excuse of the queen; however, it was only at that moment, and at that moment alone. But still ... it had been true ...

‘Well, this proves that it was our desires after all,’ Artride conceded, slightly irritated by Shanta who entirely ignored them. In addition, her eyes crossed those of Tirsa. *Is it actually your desire to kill me then? Did you think I lied to you?* she thought while Tirsa was thinking: *could you really set up your own death and vanish on me? Moreover; could you abandon your people and allow this cruelty to*

continue, without trying the last hope we have? Could you be such a coward?

They both felt betrayed and disappointed, and Tirsa felt rage building up inside of her; heating her body, making her heart beat angrily; making her want to jump on her and hit her so hard she would bleed, suffer. Her heart was beating faster still and her blood was boiling, coiling her fists, ignoring the nonchalant laughter of Shanta who was running in and out of the defrosting waterfall that had come to life again, and now was roaring and rumbling.

‘Tirsa, we have to talk this through–’

‘No,’ she answered solidly through gritted teeth, and stood.

‘No more lies, no more talking ... no more!’ Moreover, she wished she had a sword or at least a knife, and while she wished it, in the corner of her eye she spotted a knife glittering in the sun, shining on the surface of the pool below the noisy waterfall. Without thinking, she picked it up in one movement and the next she stood before Artride threatening her with the knife. Visibly she was shocked, sitting and staring at Tirsa with wide-open eyes. *So it is true, completely? Where did she get the knife from anyway? She must have it hidden from me all along ...*

‘Tirsa, for crying out loud, you are not yourself. Put away that knife ... please.’ She began to fear and she showed it.

The bodyguard threw her head backwards and started laughing madly. Artride had never seen her like this before. ‘All of these things she said that mattered were desires, yes, but only some of it is true, all of what I told you! You must know that!’ she pointed out critically.

‘No,’ Tirsa answered grimly. ‘She was telling the truth if you think about it. A Woodchild doesn’t lie and after all she is a Truth-teller.’ And she smiled wickedly and peered around.

‘You were actually going to stay here, weren’t you?’

‘No, Tirsa. Why can’t it be possible she is lying?’

‘Because when she focused on me ... what she told about *me* was all true.’

Artride’s face showed signs of shock and disappointment, and that hurt Tirsa. ‘It was? You truly want to kill me?’ she saw the other woman swallow and turn her face away in shame.

‘I can do this quest alone. I don’t need you or anyone,’ she softly responded, keeping her voice plain and louder, ‘I shall succeed.’ She suddenly stepped towards the queen with the sharp blade of the knife pointed at her throat, breathing heavily, her eyes filling with tears. ‘Why?’ Her voice was breaking up halfway.

‘If you seriously believe she was telling the complete truth about you, not a mixture; you also believe there is no curse, so why would you continue this journey?’

‘I will go back alone and have my brother released! You will have no power over him or anyone anymore! You are cunning, but vicious!’

‘I never had any power, you know that,’ she stated calmly, but clearly affected by Tirsa’s words; her eyes were big and watery.

‘You have been lying! There never was a curse; it was just an excuse to make me care! I understand now. I was an easy target; perfect to come along and protect you deep into this land. You have been playing with me. Well, you got what you wanted. You stay here to settle down and do not ever come back. I will tell “your people” you are dead, like you desire; but stay out of my sight from now on.’

The shocked pale queen shook her head slowly; her face still so friendly and understanding, although stunned; Tirsa almost could not bare it.

‘I am sorry I was not honest with you about my desire for freedom to run away, but I am now,’ she tried to explain. ‘You have to believe me. There *is* a curse, Tirsa. Moreover, this escaping thing of mine was never a real plan; it was nothing more than a crazy idea; a desire if you like from a confused frustrated mind, no more than that. I have been desperate, so very desperate. I am telling you the absolute truth. You have to believe me, trust me, like I trusted you.’

Tirsa glanced at Shanta, who was still dancing in and around the waterfall.

‘She must have told us partly truths and partly desires; like she said she would. She did not lie, Tirsa, even though she made it look like it was the truth, all of it. We had to guess and she might have interpreted a few things along the way; the worse thing a Truthteller can do. Doing this she set us up against one another and I don’t know why; but I have to admit it was cleverly done. There is a big difference between a dream, a desire so to speak, and actually acting upon it, pursuing it.’ She got up, ignoring Tirsa and her knife, and walked towards the Woodchild.

‘Shanta, can I have a word with you?’

‘It worked, it really worked!’ she cried beyond happiness, all wet and her green skin shiny. A soft breeze caught her wet hair, flicking it across her face.

‘And I am happy for you, Shanta; you said you would be more than grateful, so please listen to me!’

The girl stopped moving and stepped towards her, smiling broadly, her wet blue hair clenched to her green scalp. ‘Sorry, I got carried away. What is it?’

‘You have to be honest with us, you owe us this much; what did you see; our past or present desires or what we actually were going to do?’

Tirsa stepped forward, eavesdropping on the conversation.

The girl got a little annoyed and shook her shoulders lightly, avoiding her eyes. 'I told everything, I am sorry. I am a Truth teller and told not only the desires, but the rest as well.'

'The rest?'

'Yes, you know, all of that was inside you or has been; dreams and desires, hopes and reality.'

'In the past, right; however, you forgot to mention which of it were the dreams and which was reality. It upset us both, so perhaps you can still tell us correctly, instead of half-truths. You do owe us this much.'

Shanta shook her head, avoiding the queen's eyes. 'I cannot, not now, it took me already so much energy and—'

'But you could jump up and down, and sing and yell just now!' Tirsa called out upset. Shanta stepped back to the waterfall and knelt, cupped her hands and scooped her hands with fresh, clear, cool ice-cold water. 'Want some?' she said through big gulps.

'No, Shanta. You know what I want.'

'What is said is said, I cannot change that.' She stood, smiling. 'Thank you for your help, both of you,' and she also looked over the queen's shoulders towards a mocking Tirsa, and before the queen realized it she stepped through the waterfall and disappeared.

'Wait a minute!' she shouted, but her voice could not reach the same level of the roaring rushing water.

'Damn you!' and Artride kicked with one foot angrily at the water and a wave splashed up, leaving her upper right leg, and the dirty black breeches and boots, wet and cold. She sighed and waited a moment before going back to her companion.

'Did you hear what she said, Tirsa?'

‘Yes, I did and I believe her, she has mixed up everything,’ she said grimly. ‘But I keep thinking about what you said earlier; that she could be lured by the sorceress and ordered to do this; making her own version of it all fed by our past desires. When she didn’t find what she wanted she started telling truths as well, making up her own interpretation of it all, so she would get her waterfall back. I do think the sorceress froze it and perhaps promised to defrost it if we or other humans went along with helping her. Like her ... we are victims. If she is able to kidnap Woodchildren, she might be able to make them do this much.’

Tirsa stared at the knife with its pure, almost, white iron blade and in a flare of rage she threw it at the waterfall.

‘I can see it clearly now; we have been tricked,’ she softly said. ‘Maybe by Shanta, but more likely by the sorceress. This is, after all, her domain, and why would she let Shanta have her little valley, other than have her promise to lure whoever comes here?’ and she bit her lower lip, still avoiding the queen’s eyes. ‘I believe she did this to set us up; to make us hate each other perhaps, but either way she knows us better now. That is her advantage. Knowledge is power. She can somehow make use of that when we near her home, that much is true.’

Artride sat down beside her on a broad rock at the pool, and sighed, distressed.

They were silent for a while before Tirsa asked in a serious tone, ‘Can you forgive me?’

‘I already have. I almost believed what she said about you as well.’

‘I could never kill you, even if I did want to.’

‘You wanted to before?’ she curiously asked.

‘Only before I met you, yes. I reckon that it was my past desire. I thought it would solve my problems, as I always believed killing would. It

was just a thought, never a plan, you have to believe me on that. Things have changed. I should have been wiser. I am sorry.'

'And I am sorry for the weak fool I have been. However, I do not have this feeling of wanting to leave it all behind anymore. That has passed too. I will fight the bastards. Never let them win again!'

'I should have listened to you and left this valley at once. I should have known not to trust anyone here.'

'Well, I went along with it. We just made the wrong choice,' Artride said calmly.

'But still, I guess it's because I thought I knew Woodchildren. For a stupid moment I forgot we are in Dochas.' She rubbed her forehead.

'Do not forget it again, Tirsa, we have to be alert, avoid any contact from now on.'

'But we still don't know where the sorceress lives. How will we know where to look if we cannot ask for aid?'

Artride shook her weary head and pulled off her boots. 'I have a feeling we do not have to worry about that. If she does all the effort in slowing us down, teasing us and getting to know us, perhaps through her little Woodchildren guards, or whatever they are to her, instead of making us turn back or kill us, she must somehow want us to come closer. Do not forget that we are the first in decades, maybe longer, that advantage have gotten us this far.'

'So, we will just have to wait for a next challenge or sign that we are getting closer to her?'

'Precisely.'

'But what if her whole domain is full of wards? We might as well be heading in the wrong direction. I do not think this was so threateningly

dangerous. We were still able to think clearly, however confusing it was. I should think the more dangerous it is, the closer we get.'

'If we were about to kill each other just now, what will be next?'

Tirsa glanced up at her, upset, but saw she was smiling and quickly turned her head; relieved she was not serious.

'We will just have to search the entire country for her and we will have to do it fast to be in time.'

Tirsa nodded at that, her brother was never far off her mind, and watched the queen walk towards the inviting pool and undressing herself. 'Time for a bath first, don't you think?'

CHAPTER 12

MEMORIES

Memories, never dying; only fade

In time...

Feelings, however never fade

To the heart time does not exist, never has and never will

To the heart it is clear what it has lost

She found out that next to the cool pond there was a small deep hot water source, bubbling, sizzling and steaming.

‘You should try this, it’s warm!’ she called out while she tried the water with one foot first. She judged it to be just fine and let herself slide in. The hot, pure liquid closed around and welcomed her. It was just bearable; not too hot, but enough to let the dirt soak off her body and thaw her out.

‘You have a bath first; I will wait and guard the place,’ she heard Tirsā call from behind the bushes.

‘Alright.’

‘Just shout if you notice anything unusual!’

‘Life is about taking risks,’ Artride mumbled, trying to clear her mind, while the water already did so much without any effort from her. She lay back in the bath, relishing the warmth within and without, letting her mind drift where it would.

It is like a treat, this little paradise. I could stay here a while... but she caught herself and angrily shook her head thinking about the recent events. No, I will not forget about my task! I will enjoy this as long as it lasts, but then I will continue my mission... soon.

Tirsa stayed at the waterfall, she already had examined the rocks beyond it; there was no exit or cave so she did not understand where Shanta could have gone to. She did not know Woodchildren could make themselves invisible or vanish into thin air. *If I just knew some magic* – and she thought about the countless times she had asked her Woodchildren friends back home to teach her some tricks, but they always kindly refused. They had knowledge of ancient secret magic and it had to remain among the old TalamhClann alone. She had respected that, and had felt like an outsider again; but stayed curious and just enjoyed watching them when they were at work doing their magic. For she was allowed to observe, and she had travelled safely because of their protective spells. She wished she could have borrowed some of their spells for this journey, but then reckoned they would have been of no use anyhow, if they could not use magic on Sempervirens, or anywhere here in Dochas, if the TalamhClann couldn't either.

Those visits to them stood out in her memory. She missed them greatly and felt sick when she thought about all of the Wind-and Woodchildren in Dochas who were missing; leaving their loved ones in the dark, never knowing what happened to them, or if they were even alive. If she was just able to help them somehow ...

A familiar sound brought her out of her memories; the voice of the queen.

Quickly, instinctively alarmed, as if it had already grown into a second nature of hers, she jumped to her feet and started walking towards the pool. There she noticed Artride had wrapped herself in her blanket, obviously naked underneath. Her long hair was wet and her skin a little red from the heat and soaking too long, but clean. Walking in a relaxed manner towards her on the grass she said, 'I really needed that. Now it's

your turn while I take watch. After you have bathed, I suggest we wash our clothes in the hot spring. No soap, but it will have to do.'

Tirsa felt a little embarrassed about the situation and nodded, looking away, leaving the queen in a grassy meadow where she perched down in the gentle sunshine.

When she was undressed herself, sitting in the hot spring, she soon became peaceful as well, and found out just like Artride that the warmth and soft bubbling of the water was clearing her thoughts, and she felt a desire to stay a bit longer in this paradise. *Did Artride feel the same?*

She came to the conclusion that if she had, she must have felt reluctant to tell. Especially now that Tirsa knew her desire to stay. Artride probably thought Tirsa would be only more disappointed if she found out her weakness, or maybe she reckoned Tirsa wouldn't feel the same desire to stay, because she was stronger and had more willpower. *Well, I am not, for I do feel it.*

She only missed the soap, and had hesitated to try some leaves of the strange plants that grew here that could contain soap ingredients, but thought it safer not to try them out. Apart from that, the bath was perfect and still very alluring and tempting her to stay. *Perhaps it is magic, but I am not falling into its trap.*

When she came back, she found Artride fast asleep on her back on the meadow, with her blanket a little blown away by the soft summer breeze; exposing her long bare legs and delicate arms. A part of her uncovered round hip and breasts looked almost white as if never touched by the sun, whilst Tirsa's skin was used to days of being exposed to the giant hot star, and even still wore its tan from last summer, which already started to darken under the spring sun. Tirsa felt a warmth starting around her heart, flowing through the rest of her body.

She decided to occupy her mind and wash their clothes. *Good, at least I do not have to be embarrassed by doing this in the nude!* Strangely, she found herself back in the woodland and mountains of her youth; where in the summertime she was usually naked or poorly dressed, and even grew used to the temperature when autumn came. Her mother begged her to cover herself up when she turned sixteen and changed from a lithe boyish girl into a slim pretty woman. Her mother feared for her safety, knowing that if a traveller ever saw her like that he would surely try to ravage her.

Tirsa smiled when she thought about her mother in those days, and thinking about how naive and careless she indeed had been; not understanding fully yet what her mother meant. However, always respecting her and knowing it had to be wrong; for her mother had frightened her. Tirsa never had forgotten the evil men who killed her father and were it not for her kind patient good father, she would have believed all men were evil. Her mother, indeed, had proven to be wise, when one day riders came along the woods when she was swimming naked in her lake. *I was very fortunate they meant no harm.*

Her smile faded. How little I knew back then about the world and human nature; good and evil and the shadows that lie in between ...

She pulled their soaked breeches out of the water and rubbed the cloth together repeatedly, and firmly at a smooth rock. She rinsed all of the clothes: the breeches and the tunics in the cool water of the pool until the stains and dirt was gone.

When she came back, Artride was still asleep and she dropped and spread the clothes to dry on the sunny meadow. She had to lie down too, enjoying the warmth of the sun and the soft breeze on her naked body. The grass was high enough to cover them, but she refused to sleep, even if she

was exhausted. It was still midday, but Tirsa decided that if the queen did not wake before evening she would not rouse her either. They could camp here and Tirsa would stay on guard until her queen awoke, so that perhaps she could catch some sleep a few hours herself.

The hours passed by and the sun sank behind the mountains. She had drank some of the sweet, nourishing nectar and had put on her clothes that had dried fast in the warm wind. She felt better now that she and her clothes were clean. Despite the shield of protection she had constructed around her emotions, she was having considerable difficulty remaining aloof from the sheer excitement of this venture together with the queen. She fought against those confusing feelings and tried hard not to stare at her on the grass.

Artride had moved underneath her blanket and now lay on her side with her face on her stretched arm; her long black hair all dried and wavy. It looked like she did not have a care in the world. *If I could make it so, for her, I would. She certainly deserves it.*

She had not washed her own blanket, afraid it would not dry in time; fearing the chill of the night.

When Artride finally woke it was almost night, and Tirsa was happy she could get her rest at last.

‘You should have woken me up, Tirsa, really!’ she exclaimed.

‘No, you needed it, obviously.’ She yawned and rolled herself in her woollen blanket. Within moments, she was sleeping a dreamless, deep sleep. ‘Wake me up before dawn, please. We have to get going again,’ she had managed to say before slumbering off.

How could I have ever believed that she would kill me?

Artride saw the washed clothes, and smiled at the glass with nectar ready for her. It was dusk and a bird was singing a sweet melody to

announce the upcoming night. She did not need to make a fire for the temperature around her was comfortable, and she felt better and ready for the journey ahead, especially after the sweet juice giving her new strength.

The queen was alone with her thoughts, but felt a little disorientated for sleeping a great deal during daytime. However, she was wide-awake and thought about the recent days and happenings, looking up at the appearing stars. She inhaled the rich night air deeply and felt fit. She knew she should not enjoy this quest really, but realised she did to some degree. Apart from the encounter with her uncle, and Tirsa dying, and the trip through the swamp and through the icy mountains, it felt kind of good in itself to travel again; but most of all she enjoyed the refreshing company of wild Tirsa Lathabris. Now that things were straightened out, she was sure they could be friends when this mission was completely over, and hoped Tirsa would not distance herself from her. *She might with all the knowledge she now possesses.*

Nevertheless, she realised all too clearly that she could not return without a spell and survive herself; she had killed her uncle and would face the death penalty. The life of a queen was worth nothing compared to that of a king. Her father had warned her about the strict rules for women. She would be beheaded and her head would be hung on the branches of the Royal Tree as a reminder to the women of Ceartas that murder was a major crime; even if it was in self-defence; and also to show that men were their masters, even for a queen leading Ceartas. Plenty of women wanted to leave their suffocating marriages, but faced the harsh truth that divorce was not allowed for them and murder was not an option either. They had to endure it all; his presence, the abuse, the hard work in the house and on the land, the bearing of babies, nursing and raising children. And in the meantime wither away or simply die after taking their ill husbands lives in

despair. Death was sometimes the only solution. In the old days, these things happened more frequently than today. Women tried to teach their sons to be better men than their fathers, especially towards women. In these days, women married quite late, only when they were sure they had found a suitable match; sometimes that would even be a younger man. Men on the other hand did not have to worry about any of these things. For them divorce was indeed an option; however, killing their wives also for them meant the penalty of death, but that rarely happened.

Tirsa knows I cannot go back without a spell; perhaps that is why she feared I would truly stay here to save my own skin. I do not blame her.

Despite everything, Artride still felt some responsibility for her people and the urge to change the situation in her country, and she knew she could make a change, if she was persistent enough, and if this sorceress was willing to help them. However nothing indicated so far that she would, they had to try at any cost to convince her.

Therefore, I had better enjoy this journey, for it will most likely be my last.

~ ~ ~

After she had woken Tirsa up early in the morning to get going, Artride decided not to keep any more secrets from her. She desperately needed a friend with whom she could talk things through. Not a Jaromir or another guard with his brain in his pants.

It has been so long since I could trust someone; someone who does not want anything done from me. She thought about Ezra, the head of the kitchen who once had been her personal maid. They had established an intense friendship and a deep trust over the years, that Artride did not think she could ever share with someone else. Things were not the same anymore between them; however, Ezra never told anything to anyone

about what had happened privately between them. Still, she had distanced herself from Artride, and avoided contact lately. Artride respected that, but felt even more lonely and isolated after their break.

She glanced at Tirsa, who was drinking the nectar with her eyes closed, and thought about telling her. *Just to see how she reacts. No more secrets.* However, she knew it was more than that.

Tirsa felt her staring and glanced back, returning her smile. There was some sort of stirring in the air.

‘It is a shame we do not have those delicious breads and cookies anymore. I really do miss them,’ Artride said while combing her long hair before braiding it into one braid again.

Tirsa nodded and licked her lips. ‘But this fills the stomach just as well.’ And she made sure to fill their water bags with the delicious nourishing nectar.

‘Yes it does, but I cannot imagine that anyone can live only on this drink. Did Shanta not miss all the pleasures and variety of food?’

‘Woodchildren do not care much for food, being more spirit than body,’ Tirsa commented, lowering her head and shrugging her shoulders, like she, herself, didn’t care much about food either.

‘You know, Tirsa, I have to confess I do not know an awful lot about Woodchildren. To be honest, I never knew about their existence. I thought the storytellers had made them up. All the things I do know now I learned on this journey from you.’

She looked up from the gentle river they were sitting at to stare into the deep blue pool of the queen’s eyes.

‘Do you know them personally?’

It was not forbidden to tell about the TalamhClann to humans, but because Tirsa knew an encounter with those delicate creatures was special

and always felt she was very lucky to know them, she was very cautious in telling fellow humans about them, for the simple fact that if they remained a mystery to them and they still rather feared them, they would remain safe. She always feared that one day humans, as they had done with so many other creatures, would destroy them, if they could of course. Even if they did not have a reason or an excuse to kill, they would find one.

Telling Artride perhaps would be all right, for she trusted her now. But even so, she felt reluctant, as if she might reveal or expose them somehow. As when you shared a secret with more than one person, it somehow lost its magic.

‘I did once,’ Tirsa answered solemnly, and her face turned blank.

Artride sighed longingly. ‘I would have given anything in my childhood days to have met a real Woodchild; it would have made a big difference. But I guess they fled the Royal Woods a long time ago,’ she said cynically and made a funny face. ‘Are they common in Zoria then?’

‘They are for the ones who truly care to look, but only if your intentions are good. They know, you see. Like Shanta still knew somehow even if she was under a spell. Well, they know if a person has a good heart and if *they* want to be seen; *they* will decide, not you.’

‘Ah.’ Artride tilted her head and her eyelids drooped seductively. ‘How come you are so special?’

‘Pardon?’

Artride laughed. ‘I mean, why you? Did they ever mention why they choose you?’ *I can guess of course.*

Tirsa got up and her voice drifted off while she said, ‘One time I was still innocent, like them perhaps. A child has more chance of seeing them.’

‘So you do not anymore?’ Artride got up as well, rolling up her blanket.

‘I am afraid the last time I saw and spoke to one, not including Shanta of course, was about three years ago. They said I had changed. They said—’ and Tirsa drooped her head, ‘that I had become human.’ She swallowed hard.

‘And that was a bad thing?’

‘Oh, yes! Basically, they despise humans and sometimes pity them, but I obviously let them down for I had promised them not to become human—’

‘But Tirsa, you are.’

‘No!’ and more softly she added, ‘Yes, but I did not want to.’

Artride bit her lip, thinking about something she could say to her.

‘They don’t recognize me anymore.’ Tirsa said glaring at her hands, trying to restrain herself. She would not allow herself to cry.

‘Why are they called “children”?’

Tirsa drew in a deep gulp of morning air, scented with mulch, moss and leaves of the many bushes and plants about. She nodded to the west and led the way for the continuation of their quest; walking with Artride beside her, she answered, ‘Because they always appear rather young and innocent. However, they can get very old; they can live for up to four centuries and their skin and looks will hardly show any sign of age. And, they want to be called ‘children’ because they see themselves as children of Talamh; perhaps more than us and they act very much like children. They are still in wonderment and awe about the smallest things; they laugh a lot and like to play games and do tricks, like Shanta. But even so they are very mature and wise.’

‘Don’t they confuse being human with growing up then?’

‘I don’t think so. Perhaps grown-ups tend to forget what it is like to be a child and Woodchildren just remember us for that fact. If I ... had stayed more youthful then perhaps ...’ and Tirsa shook her head. ‘Never mind.’

‘Hmm, I often wish I could be a child again when it concerns being carefree, well you know that now. However, I am glad I am all grown-up and can make my own decisions, taking responsibility, even though it can be difficult at times to do so.’

‘Yeah.’

‘And being grown up has its advantages too.’

‘I would not want to be a child again,’ Tirsa said, ignoring the queen’s remark and the seductive glint in her eye. ‘They don’t take you seriously, and the wait to reach adulthood tends to be so long.’

‘I agree on that.’

She noticed Artride had a ring on her left hand. It was a golden delicate ornamented ring with a tiny round blue gem attached to it. It seemed to glow from within.

‘Your ring, it is beautiful, Artride.’

‘Oh, why thank you,’ she answered a little surprised. ‘It is my mother’s wedding ring actually. She only wore it two years, though.’

‘Before she ... I am sorry. But if it is a wedding ring why do you already wear it? People might think you are married.’ And she giggled at that. *Or was that a stupid, insensitive question?*

Artride looked back at her with sad eyes. ‘I want to give it to the person I love; truly love with all my heart. And by wearing it I bond with it, so when I take it off on my wedding day, it will be like I am giving that special person a part of me.’

Tirsa blushed and nodded. 'That makes sense.' *How romantic.* Although Tirsa did not believe in marriage as such – the way it binds people and the ring being a chain – but kept her thoughts to herself.

'Do not worry, we shall find a solution for the cursed book and you do not have to marry against your will.'

'Well, eventually I want to marry; I guess with the one I have chosen. Don't you?'

'I haven't given it much thought,' Tirsa said grimly.

'There was a person I loved greatly at one point,' Artride absent-mindedly said when Tirsa did not contribute more. 'Ironically, I could not have that person.' She bit her lip. Tirsa was stunned she told her this and was actually anxious to learn more about her love life, but held back. In her experience people tended to tell more when you didn't ask too many questions. Therefore, when she did not respond Artride explained, 'It was someone of my household you see; someone below my rank and well ... not the right gender.'

Not the right gender? 'A woman?' Tirsa blurted without thinking.

It was Artride who blushed this time, and she rubbed her cheek nervously, dropping her head, keeping her pace up past luscious meadows.

'You are the first I have ever told.'

She did not know what to say, but her mind raced. *Is she joking? How did she keep this a secret? Is this a coincidence? Is she fooling me?*

A long moment of silence followed, but Tirsa's mind was still going full speed.

'You do not believe me, do you?' and she laughed. 'It gets awfully lonely in the castle and ... well, Ezra was there when I needed her.' She was shocked how silly and selfish that sounded, and in a serious tone added, 'I mean ... there were other people to fall in love with of course;

there were many other people I could choose from, men as well, but Ezra, she was the daughter of the older maid I used to have and assigned to me when her mother retired. I was eighteen and she was about the same age. Being my personal maid she cared for my room, brought me food when I wanted it, did my hair and so on. It is hard not to get to know a person like that. She became my best friend.'

Tirsa remembered the young, pretty woman she had seen, who gave her the small package with the bread and biscuits they never even had a chance to taste.

'I had an arduous time facing my future role; my tasks, my training and she helped me endure it all. We became very good friends and, well – lovers. I know she really cared for me as well, but after a couple of years I understood I was asking too much of her and we tried to end it.'

She gazed around at the morning sky; a marvellous orange painted sky, a sign that the sun was on his way. Artride sighed deeply.

'She made it easy for me, for she fell in love with someone else and married him; a cook. Her love for me, I realised later was more out of loyalty; the love for her queen, than for me as a person. I doubt she would have truly fallen for me if I had been a servant as well.'

'She most certainly would have noticed you, even as a servant you would have your amazing beauty and good heart and ... after all ... she married a cook, so –'

Artride smiled warmly at Tirsa.

'Yes, but he is a man and low in rank; that would mean they truly love each other. I mean ... I am the queen. If I had been a male, it would have been the same to her. She loved me because of my rank, like so many hate or love me for my title, not for the person I am. They do not know me,' she said briskly.

‘Ezra obviously did, she was your friend first of all.’

Artride sighed. ‘Yes I thought so, but she worshipped the very ground I was walking on. I mean is that love? Should it not be more equal? Sometimes it was sickening and frightening how much she would have done for me. She even would have given her life for me. One time she drank wine suspected of being poisoned. It was a gift from a rival king and she drank it before I could touch it; saying that if she died, I could dismantle him and have him arrested for attempted murder. That king had always been a threat to our country. Luckily she did not die of course, for I understood he would not be so foolish to endanger himself like that. However, it shocked me all the same. From that day on I awoke and my eyes opened.’

‘Still, it sounds like love to me,’ Tirsa quietly spoke.

‘Love ... if it were, Tirsa, she would not have married someone else. It wasn’t true love. It was admiration and obsession in a dangerous, awful way and I failed to see it.’

Would you not die for someone you loved? Have you ever loved a person that much? Tirsa thought, but said softly, ‘Yes, loving someone sometimes comes with a price; sometimes that price is too high for a person to pay and then the only option is to let each other go.’

A long silence followed. Artride was pondering about this, and when she felt she finally understood, her eyes filled. Tirsa noticed it and tried to lighten the mood.

‘Well, I guess it is not easy to love a queen if you are a woman yourself. The book won’t allow a marriage, will it?’

‘No. I have to marry a man.’ It was almost a whisper.

‘Can you?’

Artride straightened her back and reflected, 'I seriously do not know. I have always believed it is the person you have to like, fall in love with and the gender should not really matter. But I do prefer women ... but it is not an issue anymore, so why bother discussing it?'

'Why not? Because you cannot turn back safely without a serious penalty on your head for killing your uncle?'

A funny thing she mentioned my head.

'Yes. I will die.'

'Don't say that.'

Artride exchanged a sad look. 'I know I shall, Tirsa.'

Tirsa winced and a surge of fear was creeping up her back. 'Not here, not now!' She was really upset and angry.

Artride smiled lightly at her concern. 'No, not now, but soon.'

'Does the curse have this much power then? How does this work, how long do you have?' Upset was marking her words.

'Not here in Dochas. Only when I return to Ceartas it will be, not as long as I am here, but do not worry, I have not given up. It is my life we are talking about, and the lives of others; such as your brother. No, we shall continue.'

Tirsa nodded, still looking concerned. *No wonder she initially wanted to stay here.*

'Exactly, that's what we'll do.'

If we do not find a counter spell, her only chance for survival is staying here after all, or moving to another country. She will not mind, will she?

'Look, I will understand if we are not able to get a spell and you need to stay here. You have to in order to survive. I just want you to know, I will support you either way.'

Artride reached for her hand close to her hip and gently took it. 'I appreciate that, Tirsa. But do not be bothered by it yet.' She still held her hand and squeezed it lightly to comfort her. 'My ... you are really worried about me, you are shaking!'

Tirsa pulled back reluctantly, descending her face. 'Just cold, that's all.' But she wasn't really.

'Do you still see her?' Tirsa tried to shift the queen's attention.

'Who?' She had forgotten for a moment what they were discussing. 'Oh, you mean Ezra. Sometimes. I do not need a maid anymore.' Artride laughed lightly. She chose to be the head of the kitchen and her husband is the baker. I just love her creations. But well, although there is still some chemistry between us, and she knows about the curse of course and that brings a certain intimacy, the physical thing is over between us.'

Tirsa did not expect to hear this, and she wondered why she was telling her these private things.

'I was so ashamed and I began to detest myself. I had the feeling I had used her.'

'It sounds more like you used each other.'

Artride looked oddly at her. 'Yes perhaps you're right; well, we certainly had a good time.' The queen knew she had gone a step too far and she regained her composure quickly. 'She lives in freedom now and has two children. She even asked my permission to marry the man she loved, saying she would not if I did not agree.'

'And did you?'

'Of course. I wanted to see her happy. If you ever loved someone truly, whatever has happened between you, you want that person to have a good life. I do not believe that love can turn to hate. Moreover, everyone

should have the right to be happy. With me she would never have had what she has now.'

'Indeed ironic. To turn down a queen, while so many fight and die for your hand!'

Artride laughed, showing her perfect white teeth and waving her hand indifferently.

They noticed the wind had picked up.

It must have been extremely dangerous for her. What if someone found out? The law book was strict on this as well, but no specific punishment was ever set out; but marriage or living under the same roof with your same sex loved one was forbidden, otherwise banishment would follow. She remembered how risky it had been for Mabel and her. A couple of times they were near exposure, but always managed to keep things hidden. There was gossip of course and the visible signs of affection between them, even if they avoided touch when they were among other soldiers; you had to be blind not to see it. It would have taken only one person to go to security, the protectors of the law, and they would have been banned from Ceartas, stripped of all their honour and possessions, not allowed to return ever again.

If anyone knew, no one ever did turn them in, and since they were not living together the curse could not get to them either. Tirsa Lathabris was too much respected and high ranked. Even though besides the admirers there were a couple of ill-minded, envious people who would rather see her leave and take her position. She always appeared untouchable, and if these people would have found out it could have destroyed her career. Little did anyone know that she didn't care less for herself, it was for Mabel she had feared exposure, for she was born and raised in Ceartas and despite its cruel law system, she had loved her

country greatly. More than Artride did anyway. In most countries, romantic relationships between the same gender were accepted and tolerated in their societies, and taken as such, seriously; even marriage was heard of. The more distressing it was that Ceartas had still such a long way to go.

She pondered telling Artride about Mabel and their relationship. About her death and seeing her in the Afterworld, and what she had told her. Before she had the chance to even consider the matter, the queen pointed and said, 'Looks like we are leaving this paradise behind again.'

Before them the ground was covered with a thin layer of snow, and holding each other's gaze they feared the worse. The wind was getting stronger again and colder, but with hope in their hearts they continued in what they hoped was the right direction: west.

CHAPTER 13

WINDBORNE

Even as I breathe comes an angel to their keep

Enya

Thin slanting rays of the spring sun glistened on the icy snow which cracked beneath their feet. Still heading west, they made their way through the roaring wind, searching for any new wards or signs of the sorceress.

But soon a pale white mist emerged out of the deep and enclosed the two women; however, it still enabled them to see enough to continue. Rocks and wet moss were another hindrance now that the snow seemed to lessen.

They had only walked a few miles through the clearing mist, before the ground seemed to open in front of them. Carved through the hills was a long wide, but mostly deep, ravine. It looked as if a giant meteor had hit the earth with such force it had left an enormous hole; and not even the sun would be able to reach the bottom it seemed. It was about five miles in length and perhaps two miles across. It was gigantic and overhung by the steep slopes on every side. Stocky trees leaned wearily over it, mostly pines and birch. But nothing grew in the bowl, which might as well have been a bottomless abyss, for it was hard to see from the gloom in there. Darkness and cold lived there and sand and ... wind. Gusts of wind blew and circled through the ravine, bringing up sand and even small rocks, spitting it all out on the almost barren slopes. Behind and around the ravine a new snow-capped mountain range begun; almost no different from the one they were about to leave behind. That was if they could cross

the ravine, which seemed nearly impossible. It was clear that doing so would cost them many days. Precious days.

Artride and Tirsa exchanged a discouraged glance, with the wind tugging at their clothes and hair, blowing the mist away. There was no downward track and the sides so steep and crumbly, it would be very treacherous. Artride flopped down on a rock out of breath, holding her head in her hands to protect her eyes.

Tirsa looked up at the sky and whispered, ‘Sempervirens ... where are you?’ and waited for an answer. The wind carried her words.

Nothing. She turned and repeated the same line over and over, and with every time louder. Artride looked up, somewhat distressed at seeing her partner like this, like she was about to lose her mind; but she reasoned it wasn’t such a bad idea, since Roalda had mentioned it was possible the sorceress might be able to hear them when calling her name, even if it was through this roaring wind. And that was all they wanted, right now, be it good or bad. After all they came for her aid, and for that they had to have her near.

Artride got up and walked over to her; together shouting the name of the so called Queen of Dochas.

‘Sempervirens, show yourself!’

‘Sempervirens!’

Then from the ice mountains ahead of them came a stronger gust of wind whirling about, and somehow it got a firm hold on the two shouting, distressed women, suddenly lifting them up from the ground, tossing and pulling at the very heart of them.

‘A whirlwind!’ Tirsa heard Artride yelling above the raging sound of the wind, which sounded like upset voices itself. Everything seemed smaller, which made Tirsa realize they were being lifted and carried away

from the ravine. They were going round in circles, caught in the whirlwind. Trying to get hold of Artride, she looked down and saw they were leaving the mountains behind, now getting ever smaller below them, heading for the sky. They never realized mere wind could be this strong, as where they came from there were hardly ever storms.

Besides, this had to be something other than a natural whirlwind holding them in its tight grip. Something that could think. Something or rather ... *someone*.

I hope it is her finally, Artride thought, barely able to hear her own thoughts above the raging sound, before she lost consciousness.

~ ~ ~

‘Ashmanthecartenth ... moonti washa oenca saalthen,’ said a soft whispering voice.

‘Wilthnan washa minthe.’ Another voice, higher than the first, but upset.

The old tongue! Tirsa recognized it immediately and jammed open her eyes. Everything around her was of the purest white she had ever seen; however, it didn’t hurt her eyes. It made her think of the Other Side, but she somehow knew this wasn’t where she was right now. And she was alone. *But the voices, I heard voices!* And she got up from her stretched position. Quickly she checked her body, but it seemed alright apart from cold, damp stiffness.

‘Artride?’ she called out, worried as the sound stretched out, but then seemed to bounce and return to her. The white ground underneath her was soft, smoky, damp and ... liquid. The cloth covers on her feet were drained, so were her leggings and tunic and when she started walking this floor it was like nothing she had ever felt before. She imagined walking on air must feel like this.

‘I am right here, Tirsa, stop shouting.’ And she emerged through the liquid smoke, like an angel, looking relieved to see her. ‘Are you alright?’ She didn’t smile this time, her face troubled.

‘Nothing but a little ruffled, not to mention confused. Where are we?’

‘The last thing I saw were the mountains beneath us.’ She rubbed her forehead. ‘How long were we out, anyway?’ Artride stretched one arm, trying to grab the fine layer of mist surrounding them. It felt cool and damp, moist.

‘It looks like we’re in a cloud, but that is impossible, isn’t it?’ And Tirsa’s voice bounced back to her again, just like it would in a small solid room.

‘A cloud?’

‘Well, a magical one I suppose. I heard voices, Artride, speaking in the old tongue.’

‘The same language the Woodchildren speak?’

‘Yes, Artride. We must have encountered their relatives, the Windchildren this time. They are distant cousins.’

‘Windchildren?’

‘Greetings, Ceartasians.’ It had sounded all around them in youth-like voices, both male and female.

‘Carahoose meanta hinthe.’ Tirsa greeted the voice in the old tongue gingerly; turning around, searching with her eyes for them.

Slowly a figure appeared out of the mist, with completely colourless skin and hair, all but his crystal blue eyes that seemed to mirror the sky it self. He was tall, white as snow and young with slender, muscled limbs. His thick, fair hair stood erect and his blond brows curved. As for the clothes around his firm body: silk-like breeches and tunic hung loose

and quivering around him like feathers or ... clouds, for mist sprung from the unknown fabric giving him an ethereal appearance.

Artride's mouth hung open, for she had never had seen such a beautiful young man in her life before; even if he was as white as a dead person, he seemed somehow very much alive and his lips were rosy pink.

His sky eyes sparkled with curiosity for Artride as well, although a wave of grief and anger painted his young face. Then he turned his attention to Tirsa, and as if he knew her he spoke in a metallic singing voice, 'By Father Sky, why would you call out the name of that pernicious creature? It was a very foolish thing to do.'

Artride, still speechless, glanced at Tirsa who answered gravely, 'Simple; we need her help.'

'You do not. Believe me, you who speak the old tongue; you do not,' he replied grimly, shaking his head while white mist rose from his hair.

'You don't seem to understand—'

'Tirsa, I do.' He sounded calmer and looking into his eyes she knew he did.

'So, you know who we are, and I presume, *why* we are in Dochas.'

He walked over to her, almost without effort. 'We know, but we cannot be troubled.'

'Oh, I see. I remember your kind,' Tirsa started ruefully. 'I know you higher beings don't care for the whereabouts of humans, and to be frank, I am the last to blame you. But now *you* are in danger. We could have attracted her to attention to *you*, couldn't we? And therefore *you* are frightened as you have never been before. For this is real danger and affecting you as well. We have heard about the abductions and the torment from your goddess Roalda. Now, we have no intention in wanting to bring

your people any distress or expose them to any more danger, but this is a matter of freedom; which I know is very dear to you. She has something for us, our people, that can bring us justice and freedom. Could you please tell us more about her and where she lives?’

He sighed, a longer sigh than any human could have created and they both saw a pure white plume leaving his perfect shaped mouth.

‘Who are you?’ Artride finally managed to ask, like she just woke up, and Tirsa rolled her eyes. He smiled kindly at her, showing his white almost catlike teeth. ‘My name is Kasching.’

‘And where exactly are we, Kasching?’

‘Right now; high above the Icemountains. Safe and sound from the eyes and ears of the “Dominator”, as we call her.’

‘Dominator, the sorceress? And we are truly in a cloud?’

‘Yes, something like that.’ He giggled, dropping to his knees in front of them; looking suddenly weary. ‘You have no idea what you have got yourself into. The best I can do is to blow you back to where you came from.’ And he made a hand gesture and demonstrated a soft blow like a hand kiss, making the space around them move.

‘No!’ Artride reached out and kneeled in the soft material in front of him at eyelevel. He glanced questionably at her, cocking his head to one side and nodded. ‘I am weary, and seeing you makes me remember things I do not wish to remember.’

‘Such as?’ she asked.

He blinked a couple of times and said, a little annoyed, ‘Your kind yes, and your ways, but most of all *her*.’

‘The ... “Dominator”?’ Tirsa asked.

‘Hmm. She came here, young and pretty, but angry and bitter; like you, so very much like you.’

‘You know her personally?’ Artride asked.

‘I know of her. But no one does know her personally, no. We are the children of the wind and we listen to the voices, some can even hear thoughts and memories. We carry those messages further. We can go everywhere there is wild wind, the breath of Talamh.’ He looked proud when he said that, his thoughts miles away.

‘That sounds special, but please listen,’ Artride stated calmly. ‘I have heard she has a grip on your kind and that is awful, but just because we are human does not mean we are anything like her. I cannot deny the fact I’m human and a woman, but as far as I know that’s the only thing I have in common with the person you call, the Dominator. Until today I had never ever seen a Woodchild nor a Windchild and I do not hold that against you, do I?’

He looked her straight in the eyes for a long time without blinking, before he said solemnly, ‘There are many of us, like there are many of you, and still you don’t know us like we know you. But that is of no importance. We *are* the wind, you see, as much as you are the earth beneath your feet and the ocean. It’s inside of you. We are everything; we are air. We do not show ourselves, nor do we explain our work and lives to mortals; because you wouldn’t understand, like a fish wouldn’t understand the puzzling song of a blackbird.’

‘But I am curious,’ Artride said. ‘I want to know all about you and your kind, really.’

He smiled kindly. ‘I believe you do ... really.’ He mocked her slightly and laughed, amused, showing his teeth again as he jumped up quickly, stretching himself and holding his arms up.

She glanced at Tirsa, who raised her eyebrows, feeling a little left out.

‘I have seen a Windchild before,’ Tirsa indicated dryly. ‘And he did explain to me somewhat about your kind.’

Kasching shrugged and came closer. ‘That is because we are Messengers and like to talk. Talk, talk, talk, that’s our job – and listening of course – and that must be in perfect balance. Some humans can hear us and are chosen.’ And he put a hand over his mouth as if to stop himself while he paced around.

‘Chosen?’ Tirsa asked. ‘Well, we need all the information we can get and most of all the location of Semper ... eh the Dominator. Can you help?’

‘You say she cannot see nor hear us in here. Is that why you lifted us up?’ Artride asked gently.

‘To make you stop calling her, drawing attention to ... us and our clouds.’

‘You mean there are more of you here?’ and Artride looked around, trying to find an opening to see beyond.

‘Everyone has their own cloud; their home and safe haven since the Dominator rules here; it is no longer safe to appear anywhere near the ground or even trees, for she is able to trick us and lure us away to our doom.’ He took a deep breath. It was actually easy to breathe in this cloud; humid but fresh.

‘We die within walls; for there is no wind to nurture and sustain us there. Sometimes we enter draughty buildings to gain or exchange information on a short term basis, but that should stay hidden from your ears. But as long as that creature, that... woman works her impure magic we cannot go to the surface safely at all. We cannot even gently touch the leaves to hear their memories, nor stroke the grass to hear the whisper of who has travelled there. Nor ride a morning fog. There is always the fear

she will take us away; it affects our work and our lives. She has grown strong and is growing stronger still. No mortal was able to get a grip on us immortals before. We feel we are no longer free like the wind.' And an immense sadness took over his whole face. It saddened both women deeply.

'You are immortal?' Artride asked incredulously.

He looked at her in a mysterious way when he answered. 'What always moves is. Every soul is. The way you see us is the shape of our being, because a body would die eventually. Something that doesn't move by itself, a shell, always does.' And then he sang, 'All things are living. All things are dancing in the rhythm of eternal harmony.' And he smiled sweetly at her. 'That's from one of our songs.'

'You are a spirit then?' and Artride had an urge to touch him.

'I am a Windchild,' he answered as if that explained it. 'You may touch me if you like. I am as solid as you are.' He sounded light-hearted.

'Don't, Artride!' Tirsa warned her nervously, and Artride as well as Kasching glanced suspiciously at her.

'Why not, Tirsa? I want to.'

Like a spoilt brat she thinks she can do anything that crosses her mind! Tirsa suddenly thought bitterly.

'Because Tirsa distrusts, Artride.' He looked sadly at her. 'Life has taught her that. Humans did.' And he moved his athletic body to her in a gracious motion.

'We were told to distrust anything here in Dochas to stay safe. We have a lot to risk,' Tirsa explained, a little annoyed.

'Just as you distrust us, Kasching.'

'Yes well, I have to. For all I know you could end up like her. All humans have the potential.'

‘For what? Do evil? We are not malicious, if you look well enough you see we are not,’ Artride stated.

‘Everyone can turn out like her, even you. Good and bad are not as set in stone as you think.’

They stared blankly at him, speechless and that annoyed him.

‘Alright, what do you want me to do?’ he concluded hotly. ‘Take you to her cave and let her destroy you; like she did with many before you, mortal *and* immortal alike? It’s the same to her, but it’s not to me!’ and he raised the palms of his hands in a gesture of surrender.

‘You can take us to her?’ and she took a quick, hopeful look at Tirsa before waiting for an answer from Kasching.

‘You know I can. I told you I can go anywhere.’

‘Yes, I heard you, but that’s such great news!’

‘Is it?’ he asked cynically.

‘We have undertaken a lot to get here, now please help us further,’ Artride pleaded.

He sighed again.

‘Do you comprehend the importance of our mission?’

‘I try to, but then again that is not part of our task, fathoming the human mind, but perhaps *you* can understand the Dominator and help her stop, for we cannot. Or you’ll join her and she will be even more powerful.’ He shook his head. ‘You must realize the danger of your quest. It is a mere wonder you even made it this far. The ravine would have cost you another problem, though.’

‘Will you help us, Kasching? And do you think she can help us?’ Artride begged him.

‘I can take you to the entrance of the immense cave she dwells within and I can warn you about her. She has to be very powerful if she can

get a hold on us. Furthermore, from the start of her ruling here, we cannot even leave the boundaries of Dochas. Can you believe it? Boundaries for us – Windchildren, one with the wind? And you two need a simple spell for a curse that has a grip on *humans*? Sounds to me like a done deal.’

It was getting moist inside the cloud and their skin was covered with a thin layer of dew. Artride wiped her brow with the back of her hand.

‘We have already been warned about the dangers,’ she announced courteously. ‘But we would like to know what you know about this sorceress, please. She is our last hope.’

‘I do admire your courage,’ and he seemed to ponder at their request, glancing from Tirsa to Artride and back. ‘A queen and a knight; two people with a heroic quest.’ And they suddenly had the same unpleasant feeling as when Shanta was ‘reading’ them, as if he was looking right through them. Artride wasn’t so sure he did not fathom the human mind if he could do this. He circled around them and suddenly jumped up and came to sit beside the two women, gesturing them to sit too, which they did.

‘Alright. The details I have obtained can be trusted; to my ears comes only the truth. It is best to stay as far away from her as possible; for she is pure evil, ladies. She has no conscience, no compassion; no heart. She changes the very soul of nature; somehow, she goes in against it; how we do not know. We work with Mother Talamh and Father Sky. She came to our Magical Land to find it free with only wild animals and Silent Folk and as you know good magic. The land was protected to ward off humans; for we have seen what you have done to the rest of the planet. We call you the Takers for you give so little in return, or nothing at all.’ And he twisted his mouth in scorn, before he continued, ‘So ... we noticed her entry, but somehow she was able to withstand our magic; harmless really, but before

her always very effective. People found themselves walking back to where they came from; without any memory of our land. She, however, was different; petite, but full of wrath and mind gifted. Before we could even stop her or interfere she met with one of the gods. He took her into his keep and saw her potential and taught her some of his ancient magic. We tried to warn him, for we sensed her wickedness, but he was blind with passion and love for this woman and protected her. He was seriously misled and she turned against him after many years, using her gained powers for her own selfish reasons and ambitions. Too powerful she became and destructive for us all, and began to claim the land and everything in it. Setting her own boundaries and magical guards was part of that. We knew no real evil, not to this magnitude. Now we do.'

Tirsa swallowed hard and a moment of silence followed.

'Eolas,' Artride suddenly said and Kasching raised his eyebrows at that.

'You have heard of him?'

'I just remembered Roalda mentioned a vanished god; a god of wisdom and that Semper ... er the sorceress, has something to do with that.'

'Eolas, yes that's right and furthermore, she asked us to kill her if possible,' Tirsa added.

'Well, Roalda is wise and knows what's best.'

'Have you ever seen the sorceress?' Artride asked.

Kasching stared at her for a split second before answering. 'Only at night-time does she come out of her cave; a time we rest. But, to answer your question, only when she got in three centuries ago I myself caught a brief glance of her. Ever since, I try to stay as far away as possible. You know, all our experiences are shared; so what I see, hear or even discuss

with you now will come to the ears of my fellow kind. That is why we all know what she looked like, even when it perhaps wasn't me personally who saw her. That very image is with all of us.' He turned his face away and dreamily said, 'That is why we all still dream of her.'

'But how is *she* able to notice everything? Can she listen to the wind as well?'

Reluctantly he replied, glimpsing at Artride, 'She must have found a way to do so. Perhaps a device, I do not know.'

'Abducted or overpowered Windchildren, will they help her, against their will of course, but still?' Tirsa asked.

'No, even though she might have our cousins, Woodchildren, under her spell and they will have to obey, Windchildren cannot be of much help to her. Yes, we share information, but she cannot abduct one and gain information about you *and* recapture one. For she has to release us in order to obtain information, as of course there is no wild wind in a cave. There is no chance a captured Windchild will live long in a cave. We have lost too many already; none have come back, so we can only assume the worst.'

'We had no idea,' Tirsa shuddered. 'If only I had known ...' I don't know about Artride but I feel even more driven to take this Dominator's life after we somehow obtain a counter spell!

He smiled kindly at her concern and noticed the drive and passion in her eyes. He knew it would keep her going until it was stilled. He had heard about Tirsa Lathabris of course, and only good stories.

'We would have let you know.' Looking surprised at Kasching she saw he was joking and she could not help but give a little smile.

'So, shall I take you ladies for a ride?'

Artride nodded. 'If there is nothing else to learn, I say yes. We have no time to waste!'

Kasching shook his head. 'Hold on, it can be a little uncomfortable, I guess for a human.'

'Will we black out again?'

'That is possible.'

'How long were we unconscious, anyway?' Artride asked.

'A couple of hours.'

'Great!'

'Don't you people ever rest?' he asked.

'During this mission, not unless we really need to, no.' she answered.

And the moisture got thicker around them, so they could no longer see. They heard his soothing, whispering voice assuring them, 'Do not be afraid. Trust me.' But that was hardly comforting for Artride; perhaps it was for Tirsä, but not for her.

CHAPTER 14

THE CAVE; OUT OF CONTROL

*I see love, I can see passion
I feel danger, I feel obsession.
Don't play games with the ones who love you
'Cause I hear a voice who says:
I love you ... I'll kill you...
Loneliness, I feel loneliness in my room ...
Enigma*

The noise was deafening and the sight a blur, but they certainly were moving and faster than Tirsä ever imagined a cloud would, and she thought she knew clouds ...

So much for a ride! she grimly thought.

When they seemed to slow down, she could feel a cold slender hand grasping hers. Without seeing, she knew it was Artride. Reassuringly, she gently squeezed her hand.

Finally they could distinguish shapes. A landscape beneath them; auburn green mountains surrounded by the higher snow-capped ones, but they seemed to be heading for the lower ones.

Kasching had to be near somewhere; however, they did not see him, only felt his presence. Artride remembered his words, *we are the wind*. So perhaps that meant that they were cloud too. And thinking about wind and clouds, Windchildren, and the unclear substance of which they were made of, she noticed it stopped. *But a cloud that stops, certainly will attract the attention of any sorceress, would it not?*

And as if he had read her mind again, she heard Kasching answering all around her, 'We did not stop drifting and we did not stop to change shape exactly; however, we did slow down. You have to jump now, to avoid unseeing eyes. Even if *she* knows we protect ourselves inside clouds, we would rather not attract attention. Go now.'

The two women exchanged a quick glance, now that they could see each other again, and Artride asked the last important question: 'Where is this cave?' searching for the Windchild.

He appeared again and pointed, 'Do you see that pointed rock over there, left of the shadow of this cloud?' he said in his metallic voice. Peering carefully they both nodded.

'Underneath is the small entrance to the cave; but be careful in there. No one has ever made it back. Good luck and I hope with all my heart to see you again. You may very well be *our* last hope, as well as your own.'

'Thank you very much, Kasching. We will do all we can,' Artride said a little shakily.

He nodded, looking sadly at her. 'Katasha amanthi, Kasching.' Tirsa thanked him in his language. 'Kamantha Moroontho, Tirsa, I wished we had met under different circumstances.'

When they were at the lowest point the cloud could get, Artride jumped, and Tirsa followed immediately after her.

'You know what we forgot to ask him?' Tirsa said a little ruffled from the 'ride'. 'Where we could find some food. I am starved.'

Artride chewed her lip. She peered around. 'I suppose we won't find anything here, especially not so near the cave.' And she sighed, but sounded cheerful, 'Well, we just have to strap our belts.' And tapped her

flat tummy. She was slender and rounded, but not overfed or fat as most Royalty in other countries, saturating themselves with good food.

I am used to days without proper food, but is she, as a queen?

‘We have no other choice I suppose,’ she commented worriedly, and began searching for the cave mouth.

‘Gee, Tirs, you forgot to mention Windchildren appeared so much like humans and so very mature! I mean Shanta was just a girl and I assumed ... well –’

Tirsa glanced back at her, reading her face, which was transparent and still astonished.

‘Well, they do reach adulthood.’

‘Ah, I see,’ she dryly remarked, noticing the annoyance in her voice. She came over to her, helping her search.

A little while later they found the slab of granite leaning against a rocky hillside, marking an entrance to a tiny cave. It was a very dark vertical opening. Tirsa shoved a hand in, deeper until her whole arm disappeared and she felt the dropped temperature down there. She picked up a stone and let it drop in. They both heard it bouncing back against the rocks and rolling sideways inside, indicating it wouldn’t be vertical for long.

‘How will we be able to see in there?’ Artride asked.

‘I honestly don’t know. I am more concerned right now whether we will be able to squeeze our bodies through this tiny hole at all.’

Artride kneeled down beside her and looked discouraged at the opening, which was indeed nothing more than a narrow slit in the rocks. But now that they had finally found the home of the sorceress they were both too determined to let themselves be bothered by such a minor detail.

‘We will just have to make our way and follow our nose.’ And Artride crawled on her hands and knees, sticking her head in the dark. ‘Let me go first, Artride. If everything looks alright I will call you and then you can follow.’

‘If you think it’s better that way –’

‘I do.’ Tirsa crawled beside her, pushing her aside a little to stick her head and shoulders in, which was the hardest part; then trying to shove her hips through she got stuck, and in her effort she felt the stone rubbing painfully through the cloth on her skin. Artride had an urge to push her, but hesitated, for it meant she had to touch her bottom. So she kept the necessary distance, although no Ceartasian, or for that matter, Law Book, would be able to see and judge them right now, and she was unsure how Tirsa would react if she suddenly touched her firm backside. But she seemed to manage on her own; stretching her athletic legs backwards, squeezing her hips and pulling herself up on her arms, she shoved herself inside.

‘It’s very narrow, but it does go further.’ Her voice sounded muffled. ‘I do hope we are not tricked and are crawling our way right into the den of some hungry beast waiting for us. Let me go ahead for a while.’

She disappeared into the darkness, the vertical start of the cave rounding to the right, so she had to crawl, feeling like a worm. ‘It is pitch dark in here!’ she called moaning and grunting with effort.

‘And still not any wider?’

‘No changes, but it is getting colder!’ Tirsa sounded further away now.

‘Kasching didn’t mention the cave being petite!’ Artride shouted towards her, and to herself she muttered when she got no reaction, ‘I hope this sorceress hasn’t shrunk herself to the size of a mouse or something

ridiculous. But why would she? And then again why would she not? ‘Your guess is as good as mine,’ she mumbled to herself.

‘Artride?’ It sounded very far away.

‘Yes?’

‘I have more space now; about a foot either side of me and it still goes further and pretty much horizontal. I will crawl back to guide you.’ And she did, backwards.

‘Hold on to my foot, that way we won’t lose each other in the dark.’ She sounded closer, and yes, her foot appeared.

‘Tirsa ... I am a little scared.’

‘There is no need, it’s fine.’

‘Can’t we make a torch?’

‘I would love to grant your wish and ease your fear, but with all due respect, how and with what are we going to light a fire?’

‘You tell me!’ Artride sounded upset. ‘This is madness, entering a cave without any form of light!’

‘It was you who said to follow our nose! I agree that it does seem unwise, we are basically blind in here, but right now we have no other choice than to rely on our other senses and trust our instinct.’

Artride nodded and entered the cave mouth holding on to Tirsa’s left foot. She managed to squeeze her way in with some effort and felt the cold enclosing her. ‘It’s like being born all over again!’ Artride joked, trying to calm her fears. Humour had always eased her fears before; even if she had to talk to herself most of the time these days.

The narrow passageway kept going straight on for a while, unchanged in width, before it made a slight curve to the left.

‘It is getting steeper down here again,’ Tirsa commented, touching the cold passageway walls and floor. So they moved slowly, feeling their

way, further into the dark.

‘I feel the ground is curving somewhat down. Hold on to me.’

‘I am right behind you, how in Talamh am I going to lose you?’ she teased, but suddenly she felt a strong pull of Tirsa’s foot and she was stretched forward, losing contact with the ground beneath her. ‘What –’

‘Tirsa!’ but she had gone over a ledge and now together they were falling into the darkness; Artride still holding on to her foot, screaming.

The fall seemed endless before Tirsa landed on her chest and belly; breaking her fall somewhat with her outstretched hands, hitting a hard, wet surface, closely followed by the queen behind her who fell down with a thud, before sliding downwards.

‘You ok, Artride?’ she shouted at her as the screaming had stopped, and got a confirming sound for reply.

Sliding on the slippery surface of mud and wet stone, they tried to make the ride as best as they could, Tirsa head first, Artride on her back; feet first, nearly touching her. They didn’t seem to bump into anything, and Tirsa guessed they were either lucky so far, or this was a man-made passageway to her home and anyone was supposed to enter like this. But that was hardly likely, since Sempervirens supposedly never had human guests. Thinking with fear about this idea, Artride was expecting to bump into a trap of some sort any moment, as this sorceress would surely set for unexpected, uninvited people.

However, the slide appeared fairly straight, with a small number of light curves so that their speed was enormous and sizzling. Artride began screaming with fear, and before Tirsa could warn her, this sliding path too seemed to come to an abrupt end, and they both fell a second time.

Tirsa managed to somehow turn during this longer fall, and when they did finally hit the ground she tried to make the best out of it, the way

she had been taught during her combat lessons. Artride, of course not able to hold on to Tirsa's foot this time, landed on top of her moments later. Tirsa had thrust her arms backwards to break the fall on her back a little, when she saw a blue glow beneath, just before she hit the floor with an agonizing thud.

Tirsa blacked out a moment, from pain, but more so the weight on top of her pushing the air out of her lungs. The queen stared at her sideways with frightened eyes.

She had landed on top of her sideways and together they made a perfect cross.

'Tirsa, are you alright?' she asked, lifting herself on her arms, giving her room to breathe.

Tirsa gulped for air, clutching her ribs, her face looked purple in the blue glow of the chamber they had fallen in. Artride had to act quickly, closing her eyes a moment before she started chanting and laying her open palms on her chest. She was mumbling faster and faster, and jammed open her eyes when she heard Tirsa still breathing heavily, her heartbeat fast under her touch.

'I ...'

'Ssh, spare your breath. I'll try again.' And she closed her eyes a second time, chanting.

Taking deep controlled gulps of damp air through her nose and breathing out through her mouth, she was finally able to tell Artride she didn't feel any tingling sensation like she had last time when she had healed her. But she was recovering by herself all the same; her back and lungs were still painful –, but she would live.

'My magic does not work in here!' she muttered worriedly. 'I will not be able to heal any wounds, not even our bruises from this damn fall.'

And she rubbed her own hands and legs, staring anxiously up at the dark ceiling. The slide was barely visible.

‘Look at that height!’ and turning her attention to Tirsa, ‘Are you alright?’

‘Better. And what about you?’ Tirsa asked, checking herself and rubbing her wrists. ‘Are you still in one piece?’ She looked down at herself and smiled. ‘Thanks to you I am. You broke my fall!’

‘So I am good for something then,’ she retorted cynically. Artride suddenly stared sternly at her and studied her. ‘Why do you say that?’

‘Forget it.’ She brushed it off quickly and tried to scramble up, when the queen held her arm and squeezed it lightly.

‘Don’t be this way, Tirsa.’ And she tried to guess the fair-haired woman’s thoughts; exchanging a deep glance, but Tirsa glanced away and started to look around, ignoring the queen, which wasn’t easy.

‘Look at me, Tirsa,’ she demanded, still holding her arm. Was that an order? That she of course could not resist. Her voice sent a tingle of craving through her entire body.

In the dimmed blue light, which seemed to come from another chamber in the big cavern they were in, Tirsa saw her eyes shine and her lips slowly parting.

‘You have become very important for me,’ Artride said in a deep voice. ‘And if you have come to ignore that, you are more stubborn than I thought. Without you I would not have made it this far. You’ve encouraged me to keep going and not give up. Especially in that horrible swamp; without you I would have drowned! You underestimate yourself, Tirsa. You are too modest, really. And look where we are now; we are in the cave, the sorceress’ home which we set out to find. You and I can accomplish anything!’

‘Thank you for your kind words, Artride.’ And she smiled shyly at her. At times like this it was hard to imagine her as commander at all. Maybe it was because she had lost her weapons and felt small without them. Everyone knew that was a well known fact about soldiers. So she just had to lighten her up a little.

‘I have a feeling that in here we have no use for weapons, or my healing powers for that matter,’ Artride said in a soothing voice, glancing around. And with the latter she had hit the nail right on the head, for it was exactly *that* what bothered her: the queen healing her, nursing her, and not the other way round. Tirsa was not used to this treatment, she was a commander and normally it was she who looked after her people, her company. She was not only their leader, but she was their mother and made sure they were well fed and trained and progressed as knights. She also had to check up on them all individually and make sure they were looking after their gear, weapons and uniform, and of course their steeds. She gave them a lot of freedom, even if it meant they made the occasional mistakes. They learned, and there was room for them to share their experiences. That was what earned their respect; that and the fact she was a good listener and she treated every knight as an individual, not a pawn. So, not being the one in control and not quite knowing where she stood, and slowly losing herself, bothered her greatly.

‘If she meant harm she would have had guards guarding the place,’ Artride spoke.

‘No, she wants us to come, even though the entry wasn’t great.’ And she licked her lips moist and came closer, so close Tirsa could feel the warmth of her face. Tirsa was breathing fast, but whether it was still from the fall the queen didn’t know. She locked on to her attractive olive green eyes which seemed to merge with hers. Something stirred in the air. There

was no sound, no cave, just the two of them. Electricity ran from one to the other. Artride acted on impulsive when she pressed her lips lightly onto Tirsa's. At first, Tirsa looked astonished at her, but she recognized desire when she saw it which matched her own, and did not pull away.

‘Don’t fight it,’ Artride whispered and gently urged her on. Tirsa slowly seemed to give in and relaxed under her touch, closing her eyes. Abruptly she broke the passionate, enchanting moment, opening her eyes and backing away.

Uncertain, the queen tried to read her thoughts and asked, ‘What is it?’

Ashamed, Tirsa lowered her face and stood up, turning her back on her. This was not allowed according to policy: a knight kissing a queen, never mind both being women. But Tirsa never cared much for that, and since she had got to know the queen better, and especially after her near-death experience, she knew that rank existed only in the minds of people. But still, this was a delicate situation and she could not get involved in the matter of laws, punishments and secrets any more than she already did; even if she was sorry about it.

Artride, in the meantime, realised that she had overstepped her boundaries and regretted acting on her urge.

‘I am so sorry, Tirsa; I thought you wanted it as much as I did. I thought—’

‘I just can’t,’ Tirsa said in an elevated, distressed voice.

Bewildered, Artride looked up at her with one raised eyebrow. ‘I thought ... I hoped I had become more to you than just a queen. Is it that? The fact I am the queen must still bother you, does it not? I’d hoped I had become a friend, rather than someone you had to look up to.’

Yes, but how can I forget that you are the queen? You are after all my superior and will always be ...

Tirsa shook her head, and was still getting used to the idea that Artride believed her to be a desirable friend; even though she had recognized the signs earlier on, and even though she herself was very taken with the queen; it could never be. But she also remembered her maid Ezra, and Artride always getting everything she desired; people included. Ezra too, had to walk away before it got out of hand. Maybe her falling in love with someone else was a blessing in the sky for everyone involved.

‘I guess I was wrong,’ Artride said sadly, suddenly aware of the burden she had placed onto her bodyguard when she saw the expression on her face, and the lines of worry.

‘No, you have become ... more ... to me than a queen and who wouldn’t want to be kissed by you? I mean ...’ and Tirsa stared at the striking woman in front of her, beautiful both on the inside and outside, at a loss for words. What fool would resist her?

‘It’s just ... sorry!’ and Tirsa walked away in the direction of the blue light. Artride watched her leave with a stab of pain in her heart. *Artride, you selfish idiot!*

Shortly after she stood too and walked after Tirsa. She found her standing, watching an enormous round hallway, but still the light did not come from there.

‘I take full responsibility for this, Tirsa. I don’t know what came over me. I should have used my head. This is not like me. It’s just ... that that never got me anywhere either.’

Softly she replied, ‘Don’t be sorry. I don’t regret it, but ...’ and Tirsa sighed, and Artride sensed what she wanted to say before she even

spoke., ‘It’s already too complicated as it is.’ And Tirsa faced her. ‘And besides, I don’t know if I am even ready for this.’

Stupid! You are just making up excuses not to feel anything; to get involved with anyone!

‘I see,’ Artride quietly replied. ‘I respect that; however, you do not have to fear nor worry for me, if that’s what it is. Even if you do not say it, I know that it bothers you. I can look after myself. And it is not that I can return safely without a spell anyway; so it is either death for me or a safer life without complications; either way, why not try to make the best of the time given to us? It was just a kiss.’ And she stared at her hands, painfully aware of how selfish once again she sounded. With that kiss she had forgotten all about Tirsa’s feelings and had risked their bond. It had sounded like she wanted to have fun in the time she still had left. How would Tirsa feel if she should die and once again lose someone she cared for? Whilst their mission should have nothing to do with them, nor their feelings, but be all about the search for the sorceress, lifting the curse to gain a better life for their people and to save Elimar, it had turned out to be more about the two of them!

Once the curse is lifted, it will not only affect me and her, but also the rest of the men and women of Ceartas, with these forbidden same sex feelings they could not show before or had to hide. But Artride would lay it to rest for the higher purpose of their goal right now, and thought about the little time they had left: two weeks, if they had been counting right. Feeling very guilty, Artride said, ‘We are making the best time we can here and it will not be long now; so we will be able to return in time for your brother.’ And she sighed when Tirsa remained silent.

Won’t you tell me what befell you? It is obvious something is bothering you and now I have the feeling that something else is the reason

you're holding back. If you would just tell me.

She saw the deep hurt in Tirsa's eyes and she wished she hadn't forced herself on her. Artride had heard she had lost a lover and that she was heartbroken after. However, she had wanted to hear it from her, not prise it out of her. But now she knew her mistake. Obviously it was still hurting her. She had no right, if she had just considered her feelings, and she was deeply sorry.

When do you stop mourning, Tirsa? Will you ever? Tirsa heard her own inner voice.

I wish you weren't a queen. Things would be different then.

You know being a queen doesn't mean a thing in Ceartas, and it doesn't have to for you, Artride thought as though in reply.

'I wish you would stop placing me on a pedestal, Tirsa,' she said out aloud as if reading her thoughts. 'Stop looking up to me and worshipping me like some goddess.' *Begin to treat me as a human being; an equal.*

Tirsa had still been doing that, without meaning to perhaps, but she would always adore her remarkable beauty and her kind ways, and Artride was not so foolish to miss that.

'Not you as well. I already have enough people to be worshipped by, because of my Royal rank and I am tired of that; I told you before. Being a queen with a pretty face is a curse! I am a real person of flesh and blood, like you and with feelings. Denying them would be –'

'The wisest thing to do,' Tirsa filled in.

Artride shut her mouth and dropped her head, closing her eyes. It was obvious Tirsa wanted the old distance back in order to save herself. Artride couldn't blame her for that. All she ever could do was hurt people; history had taught her that all too well.

I have gone too far. I should have kept the required distance. People expect me to be larger than life, not kiss them! Artride, Artride, it's about time you realised you can't just do what you feel like! It serves me right!

‘Alright, let’s forget it ever happened. We drop the discussion here and continue our mission and focus on that,’ she bitterly stated and looked down on herself, clearing her wet clothes from little stones. Tirsa noticed her own tunic and breeches were damaged and dark from the running water and mud. She pointed out the stream.

‘Let’s follow this brook here,’ she suggested.

Tirsa felt odd and shaky after their shared intimacy, but was ready to put her personal feelings aside for the greater good; whatever that was ... She doubted that at the moment, for whatever could be more important than to have some happiness for herself again as well? She was always fighting for others. But she could never be like Artride; just claiming what she wanted because she could.

Silently they followed the water and examined the walls around them. It was cold and moist, but breathing did not cause any problem. In the distance they heard the familiar drip-drip from water and followed the sound and the stream. Slowly it got a little brighter as they came closer to the source of the sound and the light; a big natural chamber illuminating an enchanting magical blue from the walls. Light brown stalactites were hanging from the ceiling and water was dripping from them into a dark misty lake. Thirst came over them and Artride walked thoughtlessly over to the water. Tirsa did not realize she would be that foolish to drink and paralyze herself and their task.

She took small careful sips, with Tirsa coming up behind her, sighing.

‘Cold, but clear. It wouldn’t be poisoned, otherwise I would have tasted it by now or had some sort of reaction,’ she said dully, and stood again, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, avoiding her eyes. ‘Your turn.’

Before Tirsa could respond she noticed in the corner of her eye, a small wrinkle in the water. Artride followed her gaze and saw what she saw; a head appearing in the middle of the lake.

It took her only a heartbeat to recognize the face; the wet long blonde hair, the familiar face, it belonged to Tirsa Lathabris, her own commander, bodyguard and travel partner.

Confused she raised her brows and glanced from the real Tirsa to her twin, rising lusciously out of the water with nothing on her nude slender form. Water dripping from her hair, her tanned round shoulders and hips, her small firm breasts and toned arms and long legs. Shiny wet, however not shivering. Tirsa herself, stood open mouthed, speechless from what she saw. It took her some time to recognize her own figure.

Well, without the scars I guess ...

‘This is not possible!’ she gasped, staring at the twin with the closed eyes; as if this Tirsa was asleep. Artride was overwhelmed, looking totally enchanted and frozen at the spot by the familiar, but mysterious sight of her companion, who clearly had to be some illusion. However, Tirsa was not buying it and started laughing nervously. It was like looking in the mirror and she felt a little embarrassed to see herself naked and exposed, especially in front of the queen. True, she was impressed by the magic to create such a powerful illusion, and glanced at Artride to see her totally absorbing the creature with big eyes. ‘Artride, please ... stop looking at ... me like that.’

For a moment, hearing her voice, she had her attention, but looked confused from her to the woman in the water as though she could not figure it out. ‘An illusion, that’s all,’ Tirsa exclaimed dryly. And they both waited for the creature to open her eyes or say something.

She did.

Her eyes even had the same colour and depth as Tirsa’s. Not even Tirsa could see the difference when she had stared at herself in the looking glass.

The ‘twin Tirsa’ stretched an arm towards the queen, beckoning her to come, extending a hand, smiling sweetly and innocently; even in the same way as her partner could do.

‘You drank my water, Artride. And now you are mine.’

Even the same voice ...

Confused, she remembered their shared kiss and thinking she meant that, returned her smile.

‘I ... have been waiting ... to hear you say that,’ she said with a thick tongue.

‘Oh, no. She is bewitched. Gods protect us.’ Tirsa muttered rolling her eyes. She touched Artride’s arm in warning, ‘Don’t listen to her, Artride. It’s the water from the lake you drank that must have been enchanted. Fight it.’

‘No, don’t fight me, Artride.’ The ‘twin Tirsa’ spoke sweetly, quoting her own words from moments before, coming closer, wading through the water. It did not seem deep.

‘I don’t know what she wants, but please don’t listen to her,’ Tirsa pleaded, and to her unknown double, ‘Are you the sorceress ... Sempervirens?’ but she got no reaction, for the ‘twin Tirsa’ had her

seductive eyes locked onto Artride, who had stepped even closer, drawn to her.

‘If you are, please stop this game—’

‘Come to me, Artride and we will be one, finely.’

‘Gladly.’ And she stepped into the water, reaching for the stretched hand.

Tirsa had to do something and stood abruptly in between the two, facing Artride.

‘I am right here. Don’t let yourself be fooled!’ But it was no use; Artride was indeed bewitched and could not stop looking at her enchantress.

Tirsa even tried holding on to her, wrapping her arms around her tightly. All failed, the spell was too strong even for the soldier, ignoring her fatigue.

The queen was already standing in the water up to her waist now, hand in hand with the ‘twin Tirsa’, who gently pulled her towards her. Tirsa even tried to unlock their hands which seemed to fit so perfectly, but could not untangle them.

‘Let go!’ Tirsa cried, tears building up in her eyes, despairing truly for the first time. She slapped her in the face, but the twin did not respond. Even slapping Artride gently in the face did not help. She only blinked her eyes a couple of times, but that was all. *I have to knock her down, it’s the only way!* But before she could do so, as if the ‘twin Tirsa’ had read her mind, both women disappeared immediately beneath the surface.

‘No!’ and she held her breath in distress, pulling at her hair. Then, she dived after them.

Underwater she saw how Artride was being dragged down without objection; deeper, further than she imagined this lake was. Swimming

after them, getting closer, she managed to grab an arm and pulled, trying to swim back whilst pulling. But the twin was too strong for her. But Tirsa did not let go, never in her life. *I have to think of something and fast!* And then suddenly an idea came to her; she swam closer towards Artride, who still would not look at her, but only the other creature as if she meant the world to her. Once face to face, she locked her mouth onto hers, her lips closing on hers. With her tongue she tried to reach for hers and give her some of her own water ...

The twin looked distressed, infuriated and swam closer to come between them. After that she saw Artride swallow ... a reaction; a sudden look made her aware that it was working, for her double was backing away and Artride was locking her eyes on the real Tirsa.

Her mouth water had done the trick and had removed the spell successfully.

Still holding on to their kiss, trying to remain locked on to her mouth, so that no water of the lake could mix, she felt the pull of the creature growing less and weakening. And finally, when Artride was weakening as well from loss of oxygen, Tirsa pulled her away all together and swam back to the surface, holding the limp body close to hers.

Gently, she pulled her out of the lake and lay her down on the cold brown stone, her face pale, but luckily she was breathing.

‘Artride, can you hear me?’ she panted.

Artride jammed open her eyes and inhaled the damp air, staring at Tirsa.

‘Tirsa, is that you?’

‘The one and only,’ she smiled, relieved, her eyes filling.

‘You wouldn’t believe the dream I had about you. It was the most

—’

A dream? 'We have to get you out of these clothes.' Artride's eyes glistened at that and Tirsa wondered if the spell had truly faded or if she just had replaced it.

'I would have told you it was a bad idea to drink from that water.'

Artride's expression changed as if she just remembered, and looked remorseful; pretty wrinkles of worry painted her forehead. 'I am so sorry,' she shivered.

Tirsa stood, wet and cold to the bone herself. 'If we just had some dry clothes,' ignoring her, rubbing her arms, trying to get warm.

Artride also got up and started jumping up and down to warm herself.

'We'd better hurry to find the sorceress. Maybe if we started running?' Artride suggested.

'Well, the best way is to get out of our clothes. I am sorry.' *It's not as if she hasn't seen me naked already!*

Artride pulled at her wet tunic and saw sense in that. 'But naked we would surely freeze. It is not exactly warm in here!'

'No, but I have learned that we can catch a serious cold if we stay walking with these on. I will wrap our clothes in a bundle and try to dry it later on.' *I hadn't thought of her as a prude!*

Thoughtfully Artride glanced at herself and Tirsa. *I have already put myself to shame, so I guess what harm can it be if I strip myself?*

Tirsa tried to dry her hair as well as possible and started to step out of her clothes first, wrapping her tunic around her waist as a skirt, but her breasts were bare now. They tried to avoid eye contact, but obviously felt a little uncomfortable.

Artride pulled off her boots and began to take off her tight leggings, which dropped to the floor. She shook her own tunic a couple of

times and wrapped it around her waist.

Gathering their remaining wet clothes, Tirsa realized with horror that the sorceress must have seen them kiss and knew about their infatuation. She truly must have had her eyes and ears open and followed the two women throughout their journey, and this was yet another trick or game from her side. On a positive note, that meant they were getting closer. Tirsa suggested with her eyes lowered, 'Now, I think there is only one way further into the cave and it's that way.' And she pointed, walking along the lake, trying to ignore the previous feelings. Artride, looking at her bare back, replied, 'I will follow you.' And realised with a sudden pain in her stomach she had said something similar just moments ago; to that lady of the lake or whoever she had been.

CHAPTER 15

INNER DEMONS

Do not confuse realization with insight;

Do not confuse insight with liberation

Tibetan proverb

‘It is believed that every source of water has a spirit,’ Tirsa indicated in a shivering voice, walking fast to raise her body temperature. The cave walls were illuminated with the same blue shimmer and there was only one tunnel, which made it easy for them. It was no more than a faint glow on the rocks, but it was enough to be able to see. They could see each other only dimly. Magic sang from every stone of the thick walls.

‘Such as a Windchild, but then in the water?’ Artride’s teeth were clattering.

‘Well ... although I’ve never actually seen a water-spirit, but always respected them nevertheless, I had no idea that they could take human forms. Windchildren are neither human nor ghost, you see.’

‘Hmm. Who knows what that creature really was; water-spirit or the sorceress in disguise? Speaking of creatures,’ Artride suggested, glad that at least Tirsa still talked to her after all that had happened, ‘is it not common for animals to live in caves; like bats and such?’

‘In a normal cave they would, but in here? I’m sure they can sense wicked magic more than we can and stay as far away from it. A pity though.’ Tirsa suddenly held her side with a troubled look, and doubled over with a muffled cry.

‘What ails you?’

Tirsa was breathing heavily; her face screwed up with pain.

‘I am ... not sure.’

‘Hunger is nagging you, isn’t it? I feel my stomach as well. Just try to ignore it.’

She squeezed her eyes shut and this time grabbed at her own throat.

‘I can’t ... breath.’ A look of fright distorted her face.

‘Try to, Tirsa ... easy now.’

She had to sit down for a moment, and Artride kneeled with her, looking concerned.

Her face had turned red and her eyes grew wide; she was still grabbing at her throat with both hands, sucking in air with fast sips through her nose. Next she closed her eyes and laid her hands in her lap, breathing slower and relaxing.

‘You scared me! What was it?’

Avoiding her eyes she shrugged.

‘Perhaps the air in here is a little different. Walking normal is a better idea, no running. I am getting used to the cold,’ Artride said rubbing her shoulders, raising herself again.

‘I do hope we’ll find this mysterious person soon before we both wither away.’ She put a helping hand out to Tirsa who stood up, a little off-balanced. She couldn’t help notice that her bodyguard’s eyes explored her body from top to toe, shamelessly.

Feeling most uncomfortable Artride just chuckled and walked away, closely followed by her companion who still kept her silence.

Walking ahead, she once in a while faced backwards, and even without looking she felt the eyes of the other woman burning into her back. *There is something wrong here.* However she did not bring it up.

They headed deeper into the cave, illuminated still by the blue walls.

‘I wonder if this is a natural cave or man-made,’ Artride pondered aloud. ‘What do you think?’

‘Definitely of a natural beauty,’ she responded in a low voice which made Artride’s hair in her neck stand up. *There is something both exciting and creepy about her.*

‘What makes you say that?’

She came walking beside her, which only barely was possible, for the passageway was just broad enough, so that they brushed shoulders. She stared at her in a very rude way; very intense and shameless. ‘I can just tell when I see a natural beauty.’

Now it was the queen who avoided eye contact and ignored her odd remark, and her staring.

Speeding up they happened to enter a slightly larger kind of chamber. The floor was wetter and scattered about lay rough rocks, and it appeared that the water came from a big dripping stalagmite hanging over them. ‘If you are thirsty, Tirsa, I would try this. It seems to come from outside the cave above us. But I let you decide this time.’

‘Oh, I am thirsty alright,’ she said in that same flirtatious voice, with one eyebrow raised, smiling seductively at her. Artride wasn’t used to this behaviour from her and sternly remarked, ‘Tirsa, you are hardly yourself. Maybe you should try to put your mind on the mission now and stop teasing me! I said I was sorry.’ *Surely she is paying me back! She is being cruel now!*

She didn’t get a reaction at first, just that odd cool stare, then Tirsa said, ‘I was a fool to reject you. How can anyone not go for you?’

‘Go for me?’ Those are hardly Tirsa’s words. Something is seriously wrong here!

Tirsa caressed her arm gently and came closer, trying to kiss her neck. Artride stepped back, but that made Tirsa smile. Shaking her head, Tirsa pushed her suddenly against the wall and kissed her mouth; hard and demanding.

And she was strong. Much stronger than Artride thought her to be.

Struggling Artride came away and jumped rapidly away from Tirsa.

‘What is wrong with you?’ Artride shouted at her with wild eyes. ‘This is not the time, nor the place!’

‘Oh, come on, you started it. Why not finish it here and now?’

And again Tirsa came for her and seized her breasts roughly, biting her neck, breathing heavily.

‘Stop that! You’re hurting me!’ and Artride pushed her away with effort.

‘We both want it, so stop fighting.’

Artride’s mouth fell open, and then she suspiciously narrowed her eyes when she saw a reddish glint in Tirsa’s eyes. The eyes she had come to know so well. This was not anything she had noticed before and the eyes grew redder in seconds.

‘Tirsa never would have talked to me like that; so whoever you are stop your act and leave her body!’

Tirsa started laughing aloud.

‘You cannot reverse something of your own doing. Maybe if we make a deal, have some fun that is, I will think about your request. Now, shall we continue?’

Her face became tighter and it was Artride who began to breathe severely now. *What can I do?*

Running away seemed the only option, but Tirsa soon caught her by the waist and pushed her to the floor. Tirsa was beating her on the back, digging her nails into her, Artride kept trying to fight her, but that seemed almost impossible with the force of the other; pushing her back each time. *I must hurt this creature, but that means hurting Tirsa's body!*

Without thinking further she smacked Tirsa in the face. Tirsa shook her head and grinned at Artride.

‘Now, that hurt me!’ she said cynically, her cheek turning red. She got hold of Artride’s hands, placing them above her head.

‘Are you some spirit guard?’ Artride said through clenched teeth, but got no reaction. Artride still tried to wrestle away from the stranger who had taken possession of her companion and slipped one hand out, coiling her fingers into a fist, punching Tirsa harder in the face. The stranger just licked her cracked lips and brought her body down onto Artride, taking hold of her hands, with more force this time.

‘I demand that you take me to Sempervirens!’ Artride yelled. ‘Does she know about her guards raping guests?’

Never in her life had Artride been treated with so little respect.

Punching and kicking she fought back as best as she could and her eyes caught one of the rocks on the wet cave floor. Stretching and crawling she tried to get closer to it, but the guard got a hold of her legs, scratching them, leaving bloody wounds. Quickly she seized the rock, about the size of her hand and cracked Tirsa on the back of the head, hard enough to loosen the grip and for Artride to break free. On her knees Tirsa stared a little off balance at Artride, but before she could get to her again, the queen gathered all her strength and punched her full in the face again; much harder than her first blow.

That did it and she fell back lifeless on the floor. Terrified, she watched her breathing shallowly, but remaining unconscious. Artride crawled to one of the walls, shaken and upset and started crying. Where was Tirsa?

Pulling up her legs beneath her she rocked herself for comfort and repeated her name frantically. She pressed a shaking hand to her thigh where her muscles were jumping uncontrollably.

‘Artride?’ After some time a small voice spoke from across the passage.

The queen froze on the spot and remained aloof.

Watching her companion pulling her legs up and rubbing her eyes, Artride started shaking more.

Tirsa looked up, rubbing her head. ‘Oh, there you are.’ She sounded relieved. ‘I must have blacked out. I felt so dizzy all of a sudden. Must have been oxygen loss or something.’ But then she saw how terrified the queen looked and was alarmed. She noticed her own nose bleeding and wiped the red stream away.

‘Whatever’s the matter?’ and she got up, kneeling before her. Artride backed away, clinging to the wall.

‘Back off!’ Artride yelled at Tirsa, showing a rock as a weapon.

Confused, Tirsa shook her head. ‘What? Why? Did something happen while I was unconscious?’ and she peered around cautiously and back to Artride. The next thing she saw were the cuts on the queen’s upper legs and her eyes grew bigger.

‘Who did *that* to you?’ and Tirsa got up, looking around.

Was this Tirsa or not?

Artride had to admit, she appeared genuinely concerned, unlike the Tirsa of moments ago.

Rising up, she held the rock defiantly in front of her. Tirsa could not help noticing.

‘Artride, talk to me. Why are you behaving like this and why are you angry with me and afraid?’

‘Don’t ... don’t you remember?’

‘Remember what? I passed out. What happened? Tell me.’ And she showed the palms of her hands in a powerless gesture.

Carefully she examined Tirsa; her eyes, which shone worried green in the gloomy light, her mouth slightly opened in a tormented way and her body language was clear enough. No, this wasn’t the person who just attacked her moments ago, not at all.

‘Tirsa,’ she held her hand to her mouth. ‘There was someone here ... inside your body.’

Dubiously Tirsa said, ‘What? As in taking over my body? Some ... spirit controlled my body during the time I was out?’

‘I don’t know how, all I know is that it was a perverse monster using your body to influence me and ravage m—’

‘Gods! Did he succeed?’

Artride swallowed and shook her head. She felt battered and ached all over. Tirsa wrapped her arms carefully around her, hugging her, stroking her back soothingly. Skin to skin, the queen was shaking, closing her eyes both relieved and with marvel, but tearful.

‘No,’ it came out as merely a whisper.

‘And you knocked me out, so he could leave my body?’

‘Assuming it was a “he”.’ Artride said.

‘No woman would do such a thing, I suppose.’

‘I guess you’re right.’ She sobbed.

Holding her head in her hands, Tirsa asked most concerned, 'Are you alright?'

Artride sighed and said, 'Let's just say I am glad you are back.'

Artride suddenly started screaming, aware of something behind Tirsa.

Tirsa felt an intense heat behind her back so turned around quickly.

The first thing that caught her eye was a huge red figure; radiating an enormous heat as if he was on fire. He was twice as tall as both women, and apart from his huge muscled limbs he was squarely built with a square jaw, showing big, pointy, yellow teeth. Hairless, his red bald head contained large pointed ears, rising like two flames upwards. He was naked apart from a black leather loincloth, and the yellow nails on his index-fingers and middle-fingers were as long as swords, and probably just as sharp. As humanoid as he appeared, his eyes, glowing beastlike, were golden red with vertical small black pupils.

Looking in disgust, Tirsa felt sick at the thought that this monster's soul had entered *her* body, and even sicker when the thought crossed her mind what he had done to Artride.

'What have we got here then? A girl?' he grumbled to Tirsa, who was standing closest to him. 'Ah, yes,' as if he remembered and stared at the queen. 'And a woman.' Licking his thick red-purple lips.

'You can imagine if I had appeared to you in my ... overwhelming natural shape ... I would have startled you and then we wouldn't have had as much fun as we did,' he said, accompanied by horrible guffaws.

Artride was startled all the same and Tirsa spoke for her, 'Who are you and what do you want from us?'

He grinned viciously. 'Hadn't I made myself clear enough?'

Distressed she glanced at the queen and back at the monster.

‘What, that you want my body?’ Artride said with disgust.

He raised an eyebrow and paced in front of them, never lowering his eyes.

‘As pleasant as it was, I’d rather remain in my current shape, however ...’

‘Then what is it?’ Tirsa said, most irritated with this creature, no matter how frightening he appeared.

‘Do I have to spell it out to you?’ and he glanced with lust in his eyes at the dark- haired woman.

Hotly Tirsa replied, ‘You stay away from my queen, do you hear me?’

‘Or what?’ he retorted stolidly.

‘I am Tirsa Lathabris, commander of the seventh company and sworn bodyguard of queen Artride, Cumhachd of Ceartas. Lay one finger on her again and be sure you will regret the day you were born!’

‘Why, you almost impressed me with that! Weren’t it for the lack of weapons ... Now ... I for one am fully equipped.’ And he demonstrated his long sharp nails. Are you sure you want to stand up against *me*?’

‘No doubt you have magic at your side as well, but I have something else ...’ Tirsa said.

‘Which is?’ he grumbled curiously.

‘My faith.’

He laughed roughly. ‘Oh, I see, like that will make a difference against my strength ... well you can still make up your mind. You are better off the easy way. It is less ... embarrassing.’

‘What is this all about, really?’ Artride asked sternly. ‘If I give myself to you, then what? We get to continue our way safely and see the sorceress at last?’

‘Sounds like a deal to me.’

‘You sick monster!’ Tirsa fired.

‘Thank you for the compliment! But it is of no concern to you. It seems like your queen does not resent the idea, does she?’

‘I want nothing to do with you! If you do not want to show us the way to Sempervirens, leave us alone and let us resume our path.’

‘Such a shame. We could have so much fun, the *three* of us.’

‘Artride, don’t reason with him,’ Tirsa said when she saw her losing her temper, and she whispered, ‘Don’t give him that pleasure. I will deal with him.’

‘I have no intention of giving him any pleasure! Here is a person who must learn to control his lust!’ she barked at him.

He cocked his head and it appeared he listened to her.

‘You cannot just take anything you want; especially not when it concerns living beings. I suppose you work for Sempervirens and you are lonely out here, perhaps; but really this is no way to treat anyone, certainly not a lady. You must get a grip of yourself and ... fight your own *demons*.’

Artride looked as if she just realized something. Well, it had sounded a bit awkward, since he had all the qualities of a demon himself.

‘Hmm, fight my own demons ... that is certainly new to me. You don’t want to fight me, then?’

‘Why should I? It looks like you, yourself have a major problem to solve,’ Artride stated.

Tirsa exchanged a dubious glance with her like she was saying: what are you doing? But she gave her a reassuring look back. ‘Don’t worry, I have everything under control.’ *Control*.

She pondered about that. Artride had almost zero control as a queen, but in her private life she seemed not so unfortunate; she had both

men and women crawling at her feet, begging for her attention, a look, a kind word, a smile and at best her friendship and love. And she had the power to turn them down or embrace them. When she wanted a lover she never had to look far. A true friend could cause problems, for then she had to be honest, but physical needs and simple satisfaction, no. She could have that at any time, any place. That the Law Book had a problem with that part when it ever came to light, was certainly an obstacle, but not a closed door. *Control*. Perhaps her only control in life was to make up for the loss; to have her desires and wishes granted and never before this journey had she looked upon that with a serious critical eye, and with a conscience.

Facing the demon, Artride realized it for the first time, truly. She was very much like him, perhaps she even created him unknowingly. Being in a magical land this was not unlikely. However, she had never treated anyone this unfair or demanded things they did not want themselves. Well, she didn't have to, being desirable. And with those tools she had misused her position and what was worse, misused the people involved; even Tirsia.

She swallowed hard, trying to swallow away the nasty taste she had in her mouth.

'I guess that you and I are not that dissimilar,' Artride started and the demon folded his arms in front of his chest, listening to what she had to say, remaining calm and certain of himself.

'You want me, but you forget to think about the consequences of your acts. I have done that and worse; ignoring the pain and trouble you cause the other. But you can't just do what you do because of who you are. Being a queen does not make me holy and being who you are does not mean you can't be turned down. You are strong, powerful obviously and no

match for me. But try to begin to understand what it will be like for me if you treat me like dirt, because of your own simple needs.'

The demon narrowed his eyes somewhat. 'Do you think I was made this way to be kind and thoughtful? I mean, look at me ...' he said acidly.

'Why not alter your direction; turn your strength into something positive? I can assure you, you will feel better yourself as well. Doing good always does.' She bit her lip against the hurt she felt inside of her, like she was talking to herself. *What good have I ever done for others?*

He grumbled. 'Aah, for the likes of you perhaps, but ... you are just trying to get inside my head. Lady, I was born to be like this. This ... is my fate.'

'Do not talk to me about fate!' Artride remarked hotly and Tirsa warned her again with her eyes, worried that the demon would attack like he said he would. He was just giving them time.

'You say we're all victims to the whims of fate, but I say we can change and shape our own fate if we are strong and determined enough. You just have to see it! A vast road lies before us, I agree, but we personally have to decide for ourselves which fork we take. We do not have to stick to that one straight road. We do have a free will. Who told you to be like this anyway? Tell me, have you ever hurt a being before?' Artride asked him with a sudden light in her eyes. Tirsa listened with curiosity.

'A being?'

'Yes, any living creature?'

'Like a salamander for my supper?'

'Yes, for your supper. How did that make you feel, to kill?'

'I feel nothing. It's over with a simple trample under my foot.' And he gave power to this by heavily dropping his foot so that the cave tunnel

shuddered and small rocks fell.

‘I see, perhaps because it is too small for you to see into its tiny wonderful eyes. Have you ever caused harm to something bigger?’ Artride said.

He looked scornful as if she had hit a sensitive nerve.

‘I have no lust in talking about this.’ And he stood tall.

‘No, because it is inconvenient.’

‘Irrelevant.’ He corrected her roughly.

‘Inconvenient, because when you do harm you don’t want to feel. If you did, you would have no supper, right?’

‘Right. I need to kill to survive.’ He agreed plainly.

‘Are you a carnivore?’

‘A ... what?’

‘Let me see your teeth.’

Tirsa stared in shock at her, what was she doing?

He grinned and she could see he had pretty much the same teeth as hers, apart from the somewhat longer corner teeth.

‘Hmm, you do not *have* to eat meat to survive, I see.’ Artride happily continued, ‘Now, tell me; do you absolutely *need* ... to ravage me in order to *survive*?’

The weight of her words was almost sensible in the cave chamber. Even Tirsa could feel its impact.

The monster’s eyes grew big and bulgy, and as if he was in pain he raised his hands to his head and started screaming loudly. As if fighting *his* own demons, he struggled and moved about, kicking with both feet and hands, roaring: ‘Survive!’

Artride stepped back and came to stand next to her bodyguard.

In the end he laid his hands upon his heart and with his long nails he started slashing and digging into his own chest, blood poured out richly. He was tearing apart his own chest. With terrible screams, he at last pulled out his own pulsing red heart and showed it to them. In awe and disgust they looked away. Blood started pouring out of his mouth and he never stopped laughing. The huge creature staggered, collapsing and falling forwards in front of their feet with an enormous thud.

And then silence.

The queen refused to look. Tirsa was wide-eyed, gasping for breath, trying to fathom what had just happened.

After a small moment she turned to her, saying with a pale face, 'I'd say, yes to answer your question; he did need to ravage you for his own survival.' And she swallowed away the fear and tension she had felt, proud of Artride having defeated the beast by herself with no other weapon than her intelligence and power to reason.

The queen stared numbly at her and then at the fallen demon.

'What made him change his mind, or even kill himself? My words?' Artride said incredulously.

'It does seem that way,' Tirsa nodded eagerly. 'Perhaps after your words he realized his fate in hurting others for Sempervirens to be so aimless; perhaps even the fact that he wasn't free to decide made something inside of him snap.'

Artride whispered, 'Or perhaps he understood the evil of his deeds,' and she sighed, saying after a moment's thought, 'I want to leave this place, come on.' And she walked away.

Before following her, Tirsa noticed a glittering from the corner of her eye. It was from the body of the demon. She took a better look and

found the source; it came from the side of his neck, she bend down to get cautiously closer.

‘What’s taking you so long?’ She heard Artride asking.

‘I think I’ve found something.’ And Artride kneeled at the red body too; still radiating heat.

Tiirsa pulled at a golden necklace they hadn’t noticed before, tugging hard at it. It broke and it revealed a sort of amulet; a yellow, faintly glowing stone in the shape of an arrow-point.

‘Be careful, Tirsa. Better to leave it alone.’

Suddenly when she held the amulet in her hand to observe it better, she felt it getting warmer until it became oppressively hot. So hot Tirsa had to drop it.

On the floor it started turning and the yellow light grew brighter. Both stood up, alarmed and took a step back.

‘Now what?’ Tirsa said a little irritated, but curious at the same time.

Turning and rotating it finally held still, with the point in the direction they were heading.

Exchanging glances they thought the same; was this some sort of compass?

Reaching for the amulet, it slid forward, out of Artride’s reach. Surprised she tried once more, but it headed on.

‘Looks like it wants us to follow,’ Tirsa indicated.

‘And that is what we will do, for we both know where to,’ the other woman remarked determinedly.

CHAPTER 16

MIRROR OF SOULS

*Look into the mirror of your soul; love and hate are one in all.
Sacrifice turns to revenge and believe me you'll see the face who says
I love you ... I'll kill you ... but I'll love you forever.*

Enigma

Damp narrow passages, cold wide spaces, brown stone and water dripping from the many huge stalactites; everything you would suspect from a cave such as this. However, something wasn't right.

Magic illuminated from the cave walls; a faint glow on the rocks around them so that they could see each other dimly. And magic had been in the previous strange events, so it meant they were going in the right direction, but it felt precarious. The two women were still following the glowing yellow arrow-like amulet, which was rapidly sliding over the floor, deeper into the heart of the cave. Hours had passed and they had seen tunnel after tunnel, all looking the same, and for all they knew they were going in circles. Exhaustion and thirst began to take over. And still the amber compass moved on.

'Artride ... we have to ... stop a ... moment.' Tirsa panted heavily, running behind the queen.

'I'd like to ... but ... we have to follow it!'

The bodyguard passed her and quickly stepped on top of the compass with her bare foot. She felt the heat pulsating under her skin, but slowly it died out.

'I hope we can get it going again,' Artride said, rather disappointed.

Tirsa aimed a surprised glance at her and said through gasps, 'We have been following this thing for the past hours. I wonder if it's really taking us to her.'

'We agreed on following it.'

'But not until we both drop dead. Let's rest awhile before continuing.'

They both sat down. Artride sighed. 'Very well. At least I do feel warmer from all this running.'

'You definitely are in good shape,' she remarked kindly.

'For a queen; you were going to say?'

Tirsa smiled lightly. 'No, I wasn't going to say that.'

'I try to stay in shape; as any person of my age should.'

"I can see that," Tirsa would have wanted to remark, glancing properly at the queen's well toned arms and legs, and even her flat, firm stomach proved what she had said. This was no shabby, overweight young queen. She wasn't as muscled and tight as the much endured soldier Tirsa was, but then again she already had guessed, even with her cloths still on, to be fit.

'I love running,' Artride added. 'My energy can flow freely that way.' And she took a deep breath of the thin air. 'A sense of freedom I guess, well ... and it keeps me focused. I even know some self-defence and sword handling.'

'You do?'

'I begged my father to have me trained.'

'I see. And what about your healing abilities? Where did you learn that?'

She looked away with an unadorned expression.

'That's another story.' She paused.

Tirsa waited for her to tell it, but nothing came. 'Well?'

She looked a little embarrassed. 'Well, I am gifted with healing hands, born with it so to speak. I never had any lessons. I taught myself to master it.'

'Pretty amazing.'

Tirsa had heard about other people with the gift of healing; her own mother was a little gifted, but not as gifted as Artride, and she had been taught by someone in her younger years, unlike the queen.

After some rest they decided to get going again. She removed her foot from the amulet lying motionless on the floor.

'It is rather odd, would you not say?' the queen considered, glancing around at the walls and the ceiling, which hadn't changed much over the past hours, sliding a hand through her hair. Her braid had come loose again and it gave her a wild image, plus the fact that she was bare to the waist; only covered with her damp clothes still wrapped around her waist, hanging down to her bare legs. She still had the grace and dignity fit for a queen.

'I mean ... here we are in a cave. It is beautiful of course and special in its own way. However, not so dissimilar to any other cave I have visited back home. If you are the most powerful person on Talamh, let's say Sempervirens is, then why choose a damp, cold, gloomy cave of all places to live?'

'It's remote, quiet; there are no people here to bother you. I'd say the perfect place to practice magic and hide yourself away, pretty well protected, better than most castles,' Tirsa solemnly remarked. 'It's a maze in here!'

'Hmm, true, but as a human being would you last long in here? Why not make it a little more comfortable?' Artride retorted.

‘Let’s not compare ourselves with that sorceress, please. Who knows what goes on in her head?’

‘That is exactly what we must do, Tirs. To understand her, and perhaps to get near her, we must place ourselves inside her head. Just as she is doing to us ... Why did she come here in the first place, and why this cave of all caves and stay as long as she has? And ...’ Artride added with sparkling eyes, ‘why if you are able to do magic, why not cast an illusion on this cave and make it look different, prettier, warmer and so on? She is human after all.’

‘What is to say, she hasn’t? I mean perhaps we’re not there yet.’

The moment Tirsa said that, they heard a loud thunderbolt or the crashing of a giant wave, they weren’t sure. As a result they dived for shelter and when they opened their eyes, a light so pure and white, like that inside of the magical cloud, poured into their very beings.

Everything was white, where before everything was gloomy. The stalactites had disappeared and instead, long white curtains hung from the high ceiling. White silk-like curtains with golden threads, waved gently on a gentle surreal wind; the source of which was unknown, since there had been no wind before. Even the walls felt smooth and soft where before they had been rough and cold. The temperature had risen too, just like Artride had suggested.

‘A palace!’ Tirsa concluded with wide eyes and mouth. ‘Concealed as a cave.’

It appeared they were indeed standing in a huge palace hall, magnificent and luscious and very white, which gave it a virgin appearance, but yet mysterious and ancient.

Tirsa stared at her companion for a while, before daring to ask, ‘Did you make this happen?’

‘Did I ... what? I know you thought of me as divine, but you must be joking. I have a feeling I know who did this; she must have been listening again ... I have no other explanation for it.’ Even their voices sounded smaller as happens in bigger places, unlike before. It was as if they were in a totally different location.

They started walking around and forgot all about their guiding compass.

The source for the white light was undetectable; it simply glowed all around them. The air had altered as well; it was fresher and even better scented, a faint rose scent hung all around.

‘Well, my compliments,’ Artride said, as she nodded, much in approval of the improvement.

The hall was huge and they felt very small.

Looking at the ceiling, Tirsa noticed for the first time a large object. It was flat, oval and shining, and hanging on two thin silky threads. It was slowly lowering down towards them, soundlessly.

Very gently and smoothly the object came closer, as it was coming down from the white ceiling. It was about twice as tall as they were, and as wide as both of them.

They soon recognized what it was: a mirror.

But not an ordinary mirror; it was large and oval with very clean glass and a splendid golden frame, decorated with fine symbols; so tiny it was almost impossible for human eyes to make out. They only detected circles, tangled into each other; endless circles.

With pounding hearts and anxious eyes they waited, for they knew something was bound to happen and all they could do was wait and watch.

Watching themselves, for they had to. The mirror had come down right in front of them and it was big enough for the two of them. Standing

closely together it of course reflected their image. At first they saw themselves as one would expect, and they both seized the opportunity to rearrange their hair somewhat, and checked themselves for cuts and bruises.

‘Thank heavens it’s us we are seeing and not some monster!’ Artride said nervously, glancing at Tirsa’s reflection. ‘Even if we do look like one, right now!’

The blonde woman could not help but smile, consciously concealing her breasts by crossing her arms.

‘I wonder what the purpose of this might be.’ And Tirsa glanced at the thin threads holding the weight of the what must be heavy mirror.

‘Maybe it’s some sort of passage,’ she added and gently touched the beautiful mirror, but it was as solid as any normal mirror.

After several minutes their reflection had not altered as they were expecting. But something else was to be spotted in the mirror, and both women saw it.

Behind Artride’s left shoulder an image appeared out of thin air; it was the vague reflection of her father as she had known him. Standing next to him ... her mother; whom she only recognized from a painting.

Tirsa at the same time saw behind her own right shoulder, her dear Mabel, and beside her, her own father. Behind him stood an old man who she did not recognize. Behind their relatives other people were to be seen; people they did not know, but they all smiled at them in a most friendly manner.

Artride stood motionless, staring at all those people in the mirror, and in spite of feeling fear she felt somehow glad.

‘Do you see what I see?’ The queen asked Tirsa gingerly. Crossing glances it was obvious she did. ‘Why are we seeing our loved ones?’ The

queen shook her head, staring at her mother. The reflections didn't open their mouths, but just smiled and looked at them full of love.

After a short moment Artride dared to ask who that lady behind Tirsa's right shoulder was; the one the soldier had been staring at with remorse and sadness in her eyes. It was like being on the other side all over again. To be reminded only confused her. But then again this was the doing of the sorceress and she would not be shaken again that easily.

She bit her lip at first, wrapping her arms around herself tighter for comfort, before answering, looking Mabel straight in the eyes, 'That's Mabel, my dearest friend and lover.'

Tirsa was aware that she was finally, ready to talk about her and let her go.

Artride's mouth fell open and all she could think of was, *A woman? I knew it! She is not the type to be with a man. She is like me!* And she too stared at Mabel, who nodded politely at the Queen. Artride almost blushed.

'She is ... very pretty.'

'She was,' Tirsa corrected her with a smile and a tear in the corner of her eye.

'And so young ...' Artride concluded.

'Too young to die,' was all Tirsa said, sighing.

'I am sorry, Tirsa.' And Artride remembered Barkor's words all too well; that the commander had been devastated after the death of her lover. Barkor had not known it was a woman either, or perhaps had not wanted to mention it; afraid of the consequence for her.

'Don't be. You could not prevent her from dying, not even I could,' Tirsa bitterly replied.

‘Oh, but I am most sorry, not only for your loss, Tirsa. But also for your pain and grief, and for the madness we have put you through. In a way I am responsible for our ruling. Nobody was meant to die young!’

Tirsa dropped her head at Artride’s words, her thoughts miles away.

‘I have never been in a war, but I, like my father–’ and Artride stared at his reflection, ‘have signed papers to order violence to prevent Ceartas from being captured. The Royal army, which of course includes your company will see to this well ... any threat we could not communicate with any longer. Any county or country undermining Ceartas’ authority. Now thinking back perhaps I should have let Ceartas be captured; just to see what would happen with the book and its curse. Perhaps to find out we need not even worry about the taking of the castle and the land, apart from major casualties and deaths, possibly my own. The curse might punish the invaders with death just as it does with us?’ And she sighed.

‘But I never dared to risk that for it is not mentioned in the book. It is after all a Law Book and meant only for Ceartasians. You, as a knight, had to serve your country, had to battle while I was safe in my tower. You must have seen horrible things; I cannot even begin to imagine.’

It was silent for a moment and all they could hear was the sound of their own breathing.

‘Many people die every day in battle,’ Tirsa replied, calmly staring at the queen’s reflection.

‘Violence ... when words don’t work anymore and defending ones country and its people. Soldiers fight for that, for freedom and honour and all know it is likely that they will die in doing so. Everyone has their task. You, yourself, fight a different battle than we knights do.’

‘So she ... Mabel was a knight as well?’ Artride asked but already knew the answer.

‘We fought side by side in the fifth company. We both had the same ideas about many things. Both were naturalists and we had many plans ... I knew her about three years before the war with the Umbraris started.’ Tirsa noticed for the first time she did not feel the same pain anymore when she talked about her. It seemed easier, lighter.

‘Two years ago,’ Artride added, remembering, even though she was still a princess, she had seen her father worried and absent-minded, for a change, his mind away from the book. ‘They left a trail of destruction in Ceartas, killed many Ceartasians, destroyed many settlements. We had to stop them as they were on their way to Satrea and Tarac. They held on long, for they were barbaric, but technically we were better trained and equipped. We formed a line of archers, shields and swords.’ Her eyes shone while she spoke, not seeing the queen any more. But the queen never stopped looking at Tirsa’s reflection.

‘We were aware of the risks; death was always present. But the ironic part was ...’ and Tirsa swallowed a lump away in her throat, whispering, ‘this was going to be our last battle together. We had made plans to leave the army; move south and settle down.’ And she shook her head and glanced at the reflection of Mabel in the mirror, that was still there.

‘We thought ourselves to be immortal, for we always came clean out of battle, apart from a few cuts and bruises. But this time, this time ...’ she felt the lump in her throat again.

Artride laid a comforting hand on her bare back. Tirsa again saw the image she had seen so many times after that moment printed on her mind; appearing both during the day and in sleepless nights; the enemy

who had run through their weakening shields. Like warrior ants they came slashing quickly and with effect. With mean two-handed swords and heavy axes stained with blood, cutting and swaying; killing dozens of Ceartasian soldiers; mostly men and a few women. The bodies, still screaming and crawling with pain, piled up before Mabel and Tirsa, the ground wet with their blood. The Umbrarian soldiers coming closer towards the two of them; the sword fighters, they stood back to back, while the enemy was closing in on them until a one-to-one fight for both of them began. They were not able to help each other anymore. It was each to their own. One after the other the two women slashed down a number of mad soldiers; like annoying wasps. They were well trained, but ...

‘So many ... too many,’ Tirsa murmured.

Blood splashed about and smeared their faces and clothes and their limbs grew heavy and tired. ‘Their shouting was awful.’ And she saw the number of their army lessening. Many a friend she had lost in that war and even to this day she saw the faces of the men she had killed; however, the image of her Mabel being slashed down would forever be the most shocking of all, and one that would remain with her forever. The repeating scene of many a nightmare ever since. All the nice memories she had of her couldn’t prevail over that one awful memory.

‘I saw Mabel falling down with that beast on top of her. I managed to take his life, but I was too late to save her ... covered in blood she died a slow and painful death in my arms.’

The days after her passing were painted in shades of grey and black. Not even their victory, the joy of the people, her medal and promotion could cheer her up. Mabel was gone forever, and she felt she had died with her that day and for long wanted to. But something always kept her from taking her own life. Now she knew it had been Mabel all

along and now she knew why; she needed to live to save her brother Elimar? And she would succeed; it was her sole purpose in life, all that remained for her to do.

Until she saw Mabel again on the Other Side, she had known no real pleasure or joy. The journey with the queen had made her feel things again she thought she had lost for good. The queen; even without their quest she would have fallen for her.

‘There is nothing to say to take away your pain,’ Artride said. ‘Only that my heart goes out to you,’ she almost whispered.

‘I don’t think I will ever get over her,’ Tirsa whimpered, her eyes filling and tears flowing in abundance; at last her walls were tumbling down, and Artride opened her arms for her and held her close.

‘That is impossible if you have loved someone greatly. So much you lose yourself.’

She must have been great. Was all Artride could think of.

‘You would have liked her. And she you.’ Tirsa cried as if she’d read her mind.

And when her tears had flown, she sniffed and said, ‘Many times I have been wounded, but nothing hurts more than a love that is lost.’

Artride stared at Mabel and said in a perspicacious voice, ‘Why not try to focus and hold on to the happy days together, instead of that terrible day you lost her?’

Tirsa stared at her and smiled. A look of gratitude and understanding brightened her eyes.

‘I never thought of it that way, but yes Mabel said something similar.’ And she had an urge to embrace Artride, but held back. Instead she thanked her from the bottom of her heart.

They had been standing in front of the mirror in the middle of the great white hall and all had been quiet around them.

‘I imagine they are our guardian angels now,’ Artride concluded solemnly. ‘They are all gone from us, but perhaps this mirror tells us they are still with us, looking after us, from a different place, perhaps only separated by something as thin as this; a mirror.’

Tirsa looked at her, amazed. ‘I think you are right.’

The queen smiled back at her. ‘It is a hopeful thought.’

Footsteps were to be heard in the distance and both of them froze in anxiety. Would it be her? Would they finally meet the Queen of Dochas; the mysterious sorceress Sempervirens?

But no; two young men in white emerged from the distance, marching towards them in a straight line. Looking around, the women saw that there was no escape. The white walls had closed in on them; there wasn’t even a way back. Why had they allowed themselves to lower their guard? The mirror had been a distraction.

The men both had green skins, but paler than Tirsa remembered a Woodchild to be. No small wonder when they were kept inside, and never got to walk in the sunlight and fresh air, which darkened their skin.

‘Woodchildren, Artride, both of them.’

‘What ... some of the abducted ones?’

‘Must be. I’ll reason with them.’ Tirsa said.

The men halted right in front of them; both were dressed in a tight white outfit, their dark brown medium length hair, neatly combed. They stared past Artride and Tirsa as if not really seeing them. They carried no weapons, but they behaved just like guards.

Before they realized what had happened one of the men grabbed Artride by the arm and lured her with him roughly; back to where he had

come from. Tirsa was dragged after her, loudly objecting to the rude treatment and asking questions. But, as expected, no answer came from the guards, and Tirsa, much to her disapproval, was taken to the right, into a different hallway than the queen.

‘Wait, no! You can’t do that! You have to take both of us to her!’

‘Tirsa?!’ The queen’s voice was full of fright. But as much as both of them tried to fight off their guards, it was of no use. It was as if they were made of steel and they showed no pain or emotion at the hits and kicks the women gave them. It only made their grip tighten and more painful, so Artride gave up fighting soon. Only to follow them and see where they would take her.

Tirsa on the other hand was fierce, and had no intention of being parted from the queen she had vowed to protect at all times. She kicked and used every technique she knew to break away. And she used every ounce of energy that she still possessed, and that wasn’t much to her dismay. In any case they were too strong for her. The last thing she saw was the back of the queen disappear behind one of the white curtains hanging from the ceiling, while she herself was being lifted from the floor tightly by her waist, and thrown over the guards shoulder; and carried in the opposite direction behind yet another curtain.

It was no use to try to reason with the guard, for he obviously was drugged or under some sort of spell. Tirsa remembered they were enslaved and had no will of their own, so she stopped fighting as she really had no intention of hurting the Woodchild.

No clues or signs were spotted along the long white hallway he was walking her through; the same perfect smooth boring walls; like in a dream they didn’t matter. And she was more concerned anyway about

where the strong bespelled Woodchild was taking her, and what was going to happen next ...

CHAPTER 17

GOLDEN CHAINS

What is evil, but good tortured by its own hunger and thirst

Kahlil Gibran

A soft tingling sound woke her up.

Tirsa opened her eyes to find herself being surrounded by cold oppressive grey stone walls. She was in a small empty chamber. It was immediately depressing, compared to the white from before. The white ... the white palace, the mirror, their guardian angels, the walls, the long swaying curtains. She remembered it all. She was now alone. She had lost Artride. But how could that have happened?

There was a thick fog in her mind and she couldn't recall how she had lost consciousness. She was lying on the cold floor, trying to change position. But she couldn't lower her arms, which were raised above her head feeling numb; they were held up and attached to the wall somehow. The tingling sound, like rattling chains, was again to be heard and she saw in the gloomy light that she, herself was making that sound.

She was chained. Being enslaved with sparkling *golden* cuffs which were tightly strapped around her ankles and wrists made it impossible for her to move more than an inch or so. The cuffs were firmly attached above her head to the stone walls with short heavy chains. They didn't give her much movement, only those attached to her ankles were slightly longer, but pulling at both of them only brought her pain. And added to this she found herself completely naked; stripped of any covering.

Angry, upset and full of questions, she let out a wild cry. She hoped she was heard.

‘Let me out! Do you hear? Anyone!’

After the initial helpless rage, the fast rushing of her blood and beating of her heart, she calmed a little; feeling completely drained. She wondered if they had done the same to Artride.

Lying in her quiet cell, a lot of thoughts crossed her mind, and time passed by without her having the slightest notion of how many hours had passed. After countless heartbeats and heavy breathing, for there was little fresh air in here, and falling in and out of consciousness, she felt she had lost contact with the world for good, and even though she was beyond the pain of her shrunken stomach, and hunger, her dry mouth and swollen tongue no longer bothered her, she tried to stay awake. For she felt like drifting and her spirit felt light, whereas her body was heavy and weary. She knew she was going to be safe if she just let go ...

‘No!’ she objected aloud, jamming her eyes open. *I won’t give up. I promised! I have to stay awake. Mabel and dad are here to help me, remember? The mirror gave me that hope. I am not alone and I won’t give in; whatever the reason for my enchainment! Losing hope perhaps ...* she concluded and tried to smile through her cracked lips.

‘No ... can do,’ she hissed, shuddering.

She tried to remember the words of a song her mother used to sing for both her and her sister, and she sang that song in her head, over and over again; mumbling softly until she heard a heavy low sound of stone against stone.

Right in front of her a crack in the wall appeared, and an orange light seeped in. The light moved and for a moment she thought she was back again on the Other Side. But the tall figure, apart from being dressed in white, was no angel but a handsome Woodchild, and in his hand he held a flaming torch.

The torch was wavering above her body. He seemed to examine her. She was beyond the stage of feeling embarrassed, but the anger still raged within her and she managed to ask, 'Why?'

She studied his face, narrow and pale green. It was a different guy from the ones who had taken them. His big, dark green eyes, which at one point might have shone impressively, were set like two dimmed coals in his impassive face. His eyes lowered to point out what he held in his other hand: a brown jar. Tirsa followed his gaze and stared at the jar filled with water; she knew it was water for she saw a stain of dark on the clay. He held it to her mouth, but she reached rapidly for his hair. Without so much of a look he pulled away and stepped back before placing the jar in one of her hands and started to leave.

'Wait ... p ... please,' she managed to speak with a thick tongue and throat, staring at his back; somehow, in his darkened mind her begging voice had stopped him from leaving. He did not move and Tirsa saw this as an opening.

'Why am I being held prisoner?'

No answer.

'Please tell me. I ... only ... want to see the queen. Ask her ... for something.'

He still stood motionless, holding his tongue.

'I understand you're not supposed to say anything, but ... can't you at least tell me where they have taken my Queen A ... Artride? Is she alright?'

The guard walked off through the doorway and with a low rumbling sound of stone on stone she was left alone again.

'No! I demand an explanation!' Tirsa said in a high voice, and from anger she dropped the jar while trying to throw it after him, spilling all

that source of life called water out of her reach. With a maddening, desperate look she licked her dry lips and felt like crying, which she would have done if she had any fluid in her body left to spill ...

~ ~ ~

Artride was no better off in her cell and she was nearer than Tirsa knew. Lying on her side she had heard nothing of the doorway and the shouts from the cell next to her ... These walls let no sound through, but the eyes and ears of the sorceress.

The guards did not put Artride in chains, but just tied her ankles and wrists with a thick firm rope and her arms secured behind her back. She had lost consciousness as well and had no memory of how she came to be there, and had laid for an endless time alone, naked and cold in an uncomprehending, helpless state.

Thousands of thoughts went through her mind. Not only memories of her youth passed her by; mostly pleasant, though also horrible images like nightmares, but she knew she was wide awake for she forced herself to be so. However, she saw quite clearly a dark haired wolf-like monster on two legs, chasing her around a table, through endless hallways and finally the woods. And when she thought she was safe inside a house with the door locked he found a way to open it, and with an open mouth he came for her. The image was so realistic she screamed, so loud she lost her voice, shivering all over. She had not been so terrified in her whole young life. And it was not even real.

Coming to her senses questions arose.

Heavens, what have I done to deserve to be treated like a criminal? Is it wrong in the sorceress' eyes to try to fight the system; to want to change the way we live, is that it?

She tried pulling her wrist to loosen her ropes again, without success, and screaming for attention. It sounded more like a squeak this time. Her mouth was so dry and her insides hurt so much.

As in answer to her prayers a guard with a jar appeared through the opened doorway. And just as with Tirsa he stared at her shamelessly before giving her the water. First she refused, demanding an explanation, which of course he didn't give. After he was gone she raised herself to a sitting position and pulled her legs upwards, pulling her arms underneath her so she had them in front of her. She pulled her legs underneath her buttocks. Picking up the jar carefully with shivering tight hands, she drank, closing her eyes and enjoying every sip.

She knew she had to stay alive somehow. The mirror had given her the hope she was never really alone. Her parents were near her, now more than ever, she could feel their presence. Watching over her; telling her not to worry, she would endure the time to come. For she had to, they had come so far already.

As long as there is life, as tiny a sparkle, there is hope.

~ ~ ~

Tirsa stared at the doorway, which almost wasn't visible; only a small crack was to be seen in the gray stone. She waited and waited for it to open again. She knew what she was going to do – she would make the guard stumble over her stretched legs and then she would strangle him under her legs tightly; ordering him to release her, Woodchild or not. She had it all worked out in her head, if only someone came ...

But before she knew it terrible visions slipped into her helpless mind ...

Dreams of oppressing heat, sand and blood. Hot wind across bare skin and blistering feet. Then a blazing red sky in the darkness; a fire.

Tirsa could even hear its angry hiss and see small buildings burn, hearing screaming. The screams of people being burned alive. And a red sun rising over unknown foreign desert hills; carved and shaped by the hot wind, Tirsa knew. The screaming stopped and jamming open her eyes, she knew she had been the one who had been crying out aloud at the top of her lungs, for her throat was painfully hot and burning, dry as sand ...

~ ~ ~

The wall Artride leaned on felt quite rough and turning her body she tried a sharp point on the ropes on her wrists. Again and again she rubbed the tough rope on the stone. She could even faintly smell the burned material and that made her heart pound faster. This could work, she said to herself, and worked on.

It seemed hours before just a tiny piece had broken, and the cord was thick, and more twines were to be cut, a lot more.

Her muscles ached with the effort and drops of sweat gleamed on her dirty forehead. Strands of her long, loose black hair hung around her pale face, like lengthy shadows.

Trancelike she kept rubbing until she found a rhythm, and piece after piece the rope got visibly thinner until it at last broke into two pieces. She rubbed her painful red wrists and laughed soundlessly.

A personal sense of joy came over her; her own little victory, even though she still had her ankles to do, not to mention the mysterious doorway that no doubt was only opened from the outside. It didn't lessen her relieved feeling. She was breaking free, by herself. No physical being helped her. She did it all by herself. She refused to be a victim. This was all about taking control back into her own hands.

She paused just a short moment to relieve the sore aching in her arms and catch her breath, before stretching backwards; lying on her back,

raising her legs, rubbing her ankles against the rough stone wall.

~ ~ ~

Falling in and out of consciousness it was hard to keep track of time. She had no idea how many days and nights had passed, or perhaps it was only a couple of hours? She could only guess, but that was useless and there was no one to give her answers. No one. Even the thought of having guardian angels seemed far away now in this gloomy, depressing place.

Tirsa tried singing another song in her head, but more frightening images slipped into her mind every time she tried to comfort herself. A dark haired wolf walking on two legs, a grey older woman with a mean sarcastic smile and other vague people teasing her, following her everywhere. She was never left alone. Their eyes glowing both with lust and envy, their hands grabbing her, pulling, tugging and crawling on top of her, an older man taking advantage of her. She tried to run, to hide, but there were too many. They just wouldn't leave her alone. And every time Tirsa woke up screaming, and losing herself more and more.

Once, in one of the dreams she locked herself in a room where she thought she was safe; but soon the werewolf and the woman had knocked a huge hole in it and slipped through to come closer, and shout and yell at her, and grab her. Their voices were so loud and terrible.

Crying madly, she tried to shake the images off, but found as time went by it became harder and harder. And new images started to make their appearance; even though the two main persons were never far off, she intermittently saw sheep below her window, bleating for attention. Ravenous and light-headed she drifted off again. A pack of wolfs came; real wolves this time, grey and brown, and while she was admiring their looks and smooth movements, she noticed they simply ignored the sheep and sprinted past them; coming straight for her behind the open window. A

window too high for her to jump out of, but not high enough to even keep the wolves out...

A bright jolt of fear galvanized her to wakefulness. Tirsa shook herself vigorously, thinking she must be going mad. She had had nightmares before in her life, but never so real, and not of places she didn't in the slightest recognize.

~ ~ ~

Before she was finished rubbing the rope around her ankles, Artride heard the familiar sound of the stone doorway again and she moved fast, covering the pieces of the broken rope underneath her body. She lay down again with her hands behind her back and her face away from the incoming guard, pretending to be asleep.

She stayed immobile when she heard him coming to a halt next to her, kneeling down, placing something with a clink on the floor. She recognized the smell of freshly baked bread. Her stomach growled in reply and stabbed her insides. How ironic, she thought, as it was a lot like the pain the Law Book gave her when she went away on her own without a guard. Nauseous, she leaned over and retched. In the corner of her eye she saw the guard step backwards so she wouldn't be sick on his nice, white boots.

Staring up at him, exchanging glances, holding his gaze, she thought she saw a glint of sympathy or compassion in his pale blue eyes, but as soon as it came it disappeared. He gestured at the bread and made a movement to leave. She had to act now, as dizzy and sick as she felt; there was a sense of knowing she would have to wait a long time before he would come back, if ever ...

Now was the moment.

As he turned and least expected it, she grabbed the plate and with a well-aimed throw, hit him hard to the back of one of his knees. She knew anyone would sink to his knees as he did without a sound. She jumped on top of him, hitting him hard in his face with free fists. Her legs were still bound, but did not hinder her from attacking him with all the force she possessed.

He fell sideways and remained still. She checked his pulse; he lived.

Panting heavily and ignoring the acidic taste in her mouth and the pain of her sore hands, she glanced at the doorway. Surprisingly it was still open.

She knew she could not afford to waste any more time now; she had to continue rubbing the robe off her ankles, for she could only hop around.

This took ages, but she needed her legs to be free. Staring at the open door, thinking about the sorceress, who could see all and probably did, she felt afraid, but at the same time glorious.

Likely she will send another guard, but I won't surrender without a fight!

But there were no guards coming and that made her wonder if Sempervirens truly knew what happened here or cared. She must know by now we are coming, wouldn't she – or would these guards prevent us from meeting her, disturbing her from her great work? That thought was a little discouraging.

'You will know we are still coming, you can count on that!' she hissed through her hurting throat.

Finally her ankles broke free too and her heart leaped up. Shuddering, she stood, rubbing her stiff limbs, snatching the bread in the

process and waiting no longer to go through the door.

Peeking out in the darkened hallway while taking a quick bite from the bread, she noticed a dim light in the distance. Walking towards it she realized it came from a single torch on the wall. Particles of embedded mineral reflected the flames. She gathered that here were the sorceress' dungeons, and searching left and right she tried to find other cells. She had no idea where to look for Tirsa. Standing under the flaming torch she spotted just in time two marching guards coming towards her. She turned back, looking for some shelter, but there wasn't any, but her own cell...

Standing, waiting behind the cell door, she listened as their footsteps came closer. Just when she thought they were coming to her cell the feet stopped and she heard the familiar low crashing sound of the stone doorway. But it came from another cell! Next to hers! Now why hadn't she thought of that!

Listening, deciding what to do, her heart beating in her throat, she felt that she had to act, but at the right moment. What would Tirsa have done in a situation like this? She wouldn't even think, but act immediately and do the thinking at the same time!

She slipped out of her cell quietly with her back close to the wall; she felt with her fingers for a way to close her own cell door to avoid attention, and soon found it; at waist height there was a tiny hole in the grey-brown rock by her left hand. After pushing in the hole, she saw and heard the door closing; it stopped when only a small crack remained.

Hearing one pair of footsteps, she braced herself. When a guard stood in front of her, she quickly grabbed his arms, throwing and pushing him in through the crack. In the far corner he hit the wall, but scrambled up. Pushing the hole again the door closed completely, just in time, before he had the chance to slip through to reach her.

‘Denan?’ she heard the guard from the other cell asking as he approached. She beat him to it and raced into his chest, forcing him to the wall of Tirsa’s cell with all her strength, pushing the air out of him. Surprisingly, there was little resistance. He gaped with big brown eyes at her when she squeezed his throat tightly. She glanced quickly and searched for her partner, finding her chained to the far end wall, where a limp Tirsa tried to hold her head up to proudly engage her queen.

‘Oh my goodness, Tirsa? Tell me you are alright!’

Tirsa smiled at the sight of her and nodded slowly. She glanced at her chains, and turning towards the guard again without losing her grip, angrily asked in a hoarse voice, ‘Where are the keys to those chains?’

He shook his head as if he did not know. Her grip around his neck became tighter and almost suffocating he tried to remove her hands. ‘Where?’ she repeated, and at last, he nodded heavily and showed the palms of his hands in surrender.

As she loosened her grip somewhat, he caught his breath and answered in a tiny voice,

‘We don’t carry keys, just this.’ And from underneath his tight white tunic he showed her a yellow arrow-like amulet; almost a replica of the one the demon had in his possession; the one they lost.

‘And where do these things lead to anyway?’

‘To the one; our queen.’ He seemed nervous, staring almost shyly down at his boots.

‘Everyone tends to get lost in here. The surroundings constantly change, so this amulet always guides us back to her.’

‘Understood, now ...’ and she moved her other hand to pull the amulet from the gold wire around his neck.

‘Don’t!’ he shouted and reached for it, covering her hand to protect it.

He seemed attached to it and afraid of her taking it. She decided to use it against him and with a slick face she said, ‘If you don’t give me a key to those cuffs, I will take it.’

He grabbed her hand tightly, trying to pry her hand away from his neck, his amulet. But she squeezed his throat hard and he seemed completely powerless. *Now why is that?* she wondered. *They were so strong before when we fought them ...*

‘I ...I ...’ he wanted to say something and she gave him a little more space. ‘I ... will die if you take it from me.’ Her eyes changed and showed compassion. ‘Are you sure?’

He nodded and looked pale, thinking about the cruel act of Sempervirens, when she once pulled the amulet from one of his kind when he ignored her demands. He had died instantly.

‘Very sure.’

She believed him, but did not let go of his precious throat where he seemed so vulnerable.

Tirsa looked in wonder at Artride, for she had never seen her so strong and determined before.

‘If you don’t free Tirsa right now I will easily pull this chord. We have come too far to have it all end here!’ She sounded honest enough and the guard tried to read her thoughts; which, of course, frustratingly he could not do anymore in here. Woodchildren were stripped of their magic and enslaved with these golden amulets; very much like Tirsa’s golden chains. They were as immobile as the Woodchildren were. Would they end up like them? Artride wondered, after they had lost their sanity, bestowed

with golden amulets around their necks, slaving for the sorceress unto the last of their days?

‘I promise I’ll help you and your kind, if ... you help us,’ she added carefully.

‘I can’t ... think or ... decide for myself ... anymore.’ He strained to say with effort.

‘There are no visible keys, but the ones to be made up! Everything ... is an illusion!’ he said with great difficulty now, and as she slackened her grip even more, thinking about what he meant, he raised his hands, and as Tirsa screamed to warn her, thinking he would hurt her, he quickly moved to pull at the wire. It broke and with it his soul came free. He sunk like a sack to the floor.

‘No!’ Artride screamed and fell with him, picking up the two pieces of the golden wire; trying to knot them together with trembling hands, pulling it over his head again. But he was already gone; she listened to his chest; but heard no heartbeat and felt no pulse.

Her eyes wet from tears, glancing at Tirsa, she asked, ‘What have I done?’

She shook her head in answer, looking despaired at first, but then she seemed relieved.

‘You have freed him. He was dead already,’ she said with a crooked voice, even worse than Artride’s. ‘It is possible he could not have done it himself, before.’

Artride walked towards her, ignoring the fact she was naked, picking up the freshly filled jar and piece of bread they had just taken her.

‘Woodchildren, in love with life, are very much against suicide. But now he was forced; he had failed the sorceress. Most likely ... she

would have done it otherwise, you saw the fear in his eyes. Now that you have the amulet you can go look for her.'

Placing the jar at her dry mouth, Tirsa drank carefully, but with great thirst.

'Easy, don't drink too fast.'

Tirsa coughed and then smiled. 'Here we are again; you nursing me.' She smiled faintly while Artride with one hand brushed blonde strands out of her face.

'It reminds me of the moment we first met,' she smiled back warmly, but with a worried look in her eyes. Tirsa seemed to be in a bad way; her eyes were red rimmed and her cheeks hollow, and she looked a bit yellow.

Finished drinking she chewed on a piece of bread. 'I have everything I need right here,' she cheerfully stated. 'Food, water, a friend —'

'But freedom,' Artride added, checking the chains carefully at her wrists.

'Yeah, but when you find a cure for the curse you will come back for me, won't you?'

'Don't talk nonsense; we will go together *all* the way. We'll just have to find something to open these chains with.' And she examined the ones at her feet. They both were perfectly round in shape, but ... without locks. Discouraged, she tried to hide the discovery from Tirsa and think about the words of the poor lad. No keys, but the ones to be made up? Illusions? Did that mean these chains were illusions as well? Glancing at the Woodchild lad, she thought, *he doesn't seem like an illusion to me! He is dead alright!*

But what if ... a strange thought crossed her mind; what if he was trying to help them with what he said; knowing he was going to die anyway, with something he knew to be true, unless he believed in it? What if giving up believing in what they saw would release the spell somehow? She remembered the old saying; “Only when you let go of what you know to be real, only when you question reality, you will learn that all is illusion.”

What if that was true in this case? Didn't he say as much as it *all* being an illusion in here; weren't they warned by both Roalda and Kashing about the same thing?

‘We mustn't forget that nothing is what we think it is, Tirsia.’

‘I heard what he said, Artride. I've already tried to use my creative mind; without any result.’

‘Perhaps if we worked our minds together; so we both try to think away the chains.’

‘Think away? That ... does sound a little surreal.’

‘You see? You don't think it's possible, do you?’

‘I had so many bad dreams, discouraging visions. I don't know what's real or not anymore,’ Tirsia said in such a small voice, looking so vulnerable and insecure like she had never seen her. The love in her heart grew even stronger.

‘Look at me. I am the only one in this room who is real, besides you, and that body of the poor Woodchild; that is no illusion. Everything else: the walls, the floor, the golden chains and cuffs at your arms and legs, has been made up; it's magic. Remember we're still in a cave and a very powerful mind wants to make us believe differently. She has created it all. And now it will vanish!

~ ~ ~

Tirsa had never believed it would actually happen. Her chains did break after Artride's faith that they would; or rather after letting go of what she knew to be true. Was it that simple?

It seemed it was, a bit like the illusion in the swamp when Artride despaired and Tirsa believed in breaking the illusion; only now the roles were reversed.

Artride was growing worthy of her title and becoming more a hero to her.

'What looks like the most difficult path to take at first, is often the most simple,' Artride said in a mysterious voice.

'It seems so logical if you come to think of it; but I have to admit I didn't expect it to be so simple,' Tirsa answered, rubbing her wrists.

'I have a feeling she again has put us through some test; a cruel one and we thought it impossible to escape without keys; while they were right under our nose.'

'Well, it appears to me you already know her well, and she won't be fooling you any more!' Tirsa smiled and took another sip of the water.

'Quiet right.' Artride laughed, and they continued their search for the sorceress, which was a lot easier now they knew that the arrow-like amulet was indeed a compass, with Sempervirens as their destination.

'I was worried sick about you,' Tirsa conceded.

Artride impulsively slid her hand tenderly into Tirsa's. Electricity shot warmly through Tirsa.

'And to think we were only parted by a wall!'

'A very thick wall.'

'An illusion,' Artride reminded her.

They were back in a white corridor, which seemed endlessly long, with no turns whatsoever, but their compass slid at a pleasant speed ahead

of them over the white floor.

Then the scenery changed and the corridor ended in a spacious round hall. The white of the walls shone with majestic colours; the colours of the rainbow, but not only the walls, the very essence of the air was illuminated with colours. It was transparent and even the two women were covered in it. Looking up they soon spotted the source for the profusion of transparent shades and light: a giant round glass window was placed in the ceiling of the hall. Knowing they were still in a cave, they could see the clear blue sky outside; so close but yet so far. The sun was not to be seen, but its light reflected on the white walls and because of the glass window it had a magical effect.

Without speaking they bathed in this healing light. Looking at each other they admired their naked skin being painted by the rainbow colours. Their faces purple, necks red and breasts and torsos blue, followed by green for their lower bodies and legs, yellow for the knees and their feet orange. It made them giggle in wonder.

The compass slowly moved on, so they had to follow if they didn't want to lose it. At the end of the round hall a huge circular gate was to be seen. The compass stopped there.

The gate was shining by itself; completely solid gold and carved with many symbols, however without any knob or other suggestion of how to open it.

‘A snake that bites her tail, hmm,’ Tirsa said with narrowed eyes; staring at the symbols. ‘A sign of infinity.’

‘Or cunningness, when you think about the snake,’ Artride commented, thinking about Tirsa's nickname.

‘Or both.’

There were also a lot of heads beautifully carved in the gold, filled up with a black kind of paint. Mostly cats with big, hypnotizing eyes, and birds of prey.

‘Art. At least it’s a sign of humanity,’ The queen suggested.

‘Then why do I have the feeling that it is not something to be joyous about?’

Artride stared questionably at Tirsa, who picked up the compass carefully.

‘So, what do we do; knock?’ she asked the queen.

‘Please try.’

‘Alright.’ And she bunched her fist and knocked shrewdly at the gate. Thinking it to be solid gold; she suspected there would be almost no sound, but instead a loud noise echoed through the entire hall, which had been deathly quiet before.

It startled them both and it made them nervous.

‘At least that must have gotten someone’s attention!’ Tirsa stated anxiously. Artride’s eyes were tired and somewhat hollow in her face; little was left of the glorious feeling she had felt before, but she could feel excitement just the same, even though she wasn’t showing it.

Nothing happened at first, and waiting impatiently with heavy hearts it seemed for ever before at last the gate slowly opened with a deep rumbling sound, which again echoed through the rainbow hall.

Curious, they looked in when the gate was completely opened. A thick fog clouded their view; only a piece of what appeared to be a narrow bridge of glass was to be seen. Beneath the bridge was a bottomless abyss, clouded in a pink, innocent-looking mist. Looking up, it seemed as though a grey sky was about them as if they were outside, with mist rising from below. It felt as if they were standing high up, too.

‘It seems we are leaving the cave and now really entering her palace,’ Artride mentioned and her companion nodded. She commented in a shivering voice, ‘Or this is an illusion as well; we can never be sure.’ They both wrapped their arms around their naked bodies; for the temperature had dropped.

‘Well, we’ll have to find out then, won’t we?’ Tirsa stated daringly and stepped upon the glass bridge; which seemed so thin it could break underneath her feet.

She took a few careful steps, nodding at Artride who came after her.

‘Don’t look around you or below; it’s probably to scare or discourage us, look at where you are going instead,’ she advised her.

Lights were flashing about them now and a few steps later a low thunder rumbled above them. The thick darkening clouds moved closer and made it harder for them to see where they were going; so all they could do was look at their feet. After they had taken about twenty steps another lightning bolt split the sky closely behind them and a thunderbolt crashed at the same time. A glittering high sound followed next; the deafening sound of breaking glass, only ten times louder ...

Both looked back and saw through the dense dark pink mist that the start of the bridge at the gate, which still stood wide open, was broken and the pieces were falling into the depths. And small cracks were forming and were coming their way; one piece after another, shattering behind it.

Tirsa swallowed. It was not the scenery which was the only thing dangerous anymore, but the very path beneath their feet. There was only one option ...

‘Run!’ she shouted and Artride; who had frozen at the spot, ran immediately after her.

They kept running without looking back, and Artride, who was the last person to leave the bridge to jump after her friend, felt the glass below her feet give way. Her feet lost ground and she fell. She quickly got a hold of the edge of the bridge at the foot of another open gate, solid wood this time. Tirsa dropped down on her knees and reached her hands out for her. All around them a deafening storm was bellowing, pulling at the queen, whose very life hung on her two hands. The glass bridge was completely gone now. Artride grabbed her hands one by one, and Tirsa used all her strength to pull her up, while Artride firmly held on to her arms; climbing up.

‘Don’t let go!’ Tirsa commanded her. Tears were rolling down her cheeks when the queen seemed to squeeze the woman’s arms painfully. No, she would not let go of her, she felt.

At last the queen managed to grab her shoulders and Tirsa was able to pull her up further.

Out of breath, she embraced her bodyguard tightly, skin to skin. The wind was blowing about them and it wasn’t a friendly wind. It was angry. They held each other for a moment while Tirsa stared at where the bridge had been. She was angry and upset. Another obstacle, how much more could they endure?

‘If this was an illusion,’ she said, ‘then it was a mighty real one! You could have fallen to your death!’

‘We both could have!’ Artride corrected her with a broken voice.

‘Either way, she has gone too far now, for I am sure this was of her doing! We have to work mighty hard for this counter spell!’ and she stood, helping the queen up as well.

‘Why would she treat us like enemies, this is getting ridiculous!’

‘I am determined to find out and it better be soon; for I have lost all track of time,’ Tirsa said, thinking about her brother.

‘We still have time, but I agree it is about time we get to see this trickster.’

And Artride firmly grabbed her hand and guided her through the open gate, where in the distance a reddish glow was flickering.

It was a huge, broad red curtain hanging in the dark surrounding corridor, which spread the reddish light. It wasn’t an angry red, but a warm welcoming red, a very physical kind of red; like the inside of a womb. The thick velvet-like curtain waved gently on a warm wind. Artride had to push it aside, for it was blocking their way. It felt very soft when she touched it and she peeked curiously behind it. A little disappointed they discovered more curtains; slightly thinner and silky with pastel colours: yellow, pink, orange, green and blue.

‘Well, she is definitely into colours,’ Tirsa whispered.

‘And into curtains,’ Artride added.

The curtains were waving gently from the white ceiling all the way to the white floor, and the light was all around them from an undetectable source.

Still holding hands they moved on along the lovely curtains which felt sensuous, almost erotic, when brushing them with their shoulders. *I bet they are enchanted*, Tirsa suspected, and reached out gently.

‘Don’t touch them, Tirsa,’ Artride warned her, squeezing her hand gently.

Tirsa swallowed hard and looked at Artride. ‘But we have to if we want to cross this passage way.’

‘Just try to avoid it as much as you can. It is only logical that this is some trick too. Just use your shoulders like this.’ And she showed her

the best way; slipping through the curtains faster.

Some seemed to stick to them, touching their hair and the bare skin of their arms and legs; like they were charged with electricity. And all the while they waved and waved gently on soft music only those curtains could feel.

The enchanted veils had a luscious result on the two women who were breathing heavily with their cheeks crimson; not trying to look and feel at the other and give in to the very present pulsating urge. There seemed no end to the veils which were draping around them, slowing them down; clinging to them and sometimes holding on to them like giant limbs. It became a little too much for Tirsa at one point and she became more and more frustrated; tugging hard at the curtains. At one point Artride was so wrapped in a pink curtain it seemed to suffocate her as well, and the bodyguard tried to rip the cloth off her. She tore the cloth from her body with effort and in doing so, they both noticed the cloth begin to bleed! Artride lay covered in it on the floor with Tirsa holding on to the bleeding rags!

‘How can this be happening?’ Artride cried while Tirsa freed her of the last bits and pulled her up against her body.

‘I don’t want to know.’ She bit her lip hard and looked away; away from Artride, away from the urge of passion she could not, would not give in to, walking backwards, getting tangled in veils herself.

‘But it’s alive! They are alive, Tirsa!’ Artride almost cried. Pieces of bloody cloth still clung to her and she tried to examine them and noticed they still moved! Ripping them from her in horror she ran away, into the sea of veils, leaving her bodyguard behind.

‘Wait for me!’

Running, Artride finally saw what appeared the end of the living curtains and she jumped into the clearing. Breathing heavily she stared into the direction she came from, waiting for Tirsa to come. She jumped too; with a green veil stuck around her waist.

Looking backwards the veils seemed not at all frightening.

They both sat down for a while on the pure, white marble-like floor, checking themselves and each other for injuries, but even though Artride was covered in smears of blood, it was not hers.

‘I think it was more to mess with our heads,’ Tirsa concluded, and the other woman nodded. They exchanged looks.

It was hard not to look at the queen, naked, kneeling. She was striking, even in this state, even more so perhaps; wild, and the bruises and the dirt spots did nothing to spoil that.

Tirsa stood up, wrapping the green veil around herself like a dress, and picked one of the purple, torn cloths up. It wasn’t moving anymore. It was big enough for her to wrap around the queen, which she did.

‘Arms up, please.’

‘What, no ... I don’t want those around me.’

‘We can’t show ourselves naked to the sorceress. I want you to have some dignity and besides ... she would be too distracted by your beauty ...’

She strapped and knotted the veil underneath her arms and her breasts held it in place.

Artride turned around. *She or you?* She found herself thinking, but only smiled thankfully.

The giant room had been dark before, but suddenly it changed into dark blue; like the colour of Artride’s eyes. And a small light appeared in

the middle on the blue floor. It gave the impression it was water all around them; however, touching the solid floor it was clear it wasn't.

It was Tirsa who had sought the warm, familiar hand of the queen now.

With a sudden glance of surprise and wonder she side-glared at her.

Something was bound to happen in this room and they both could feel the sudden tension; it had something to do with the growing light in its centre.

When they waited it appeared that what they had mistaken for a light wasn't a light at all; but it only showed with an inner light. It was a tiny flower; a white, closed water lily and it was slowly growing.

And while it did, the blue room got brighter and smoke arose from below. It was showing a heavy blue now while the water lily was about the size of a water melon, and still it kept growing.

The blue changed into a rich light green; such as of new leaves.

Speechless they kept staring at the flower, which had reached their own size. Waiting they noticed it stayed that way. Its green, floating leaves were marvellous and the leaves of the flower a mixture of pink, yellow and white. However, while the flower had grown; its leaves had not yet unfolded.

'Like there is something in it ...' Artride whispered and held her breath in anticipation.

CHAPTER 18

THE FINAL TEST

*She who receives evil does evil
She who does evil receives evil
She who receives love gives love
She who gives love receives love...*

*Maybe I'll wake up for once
Not tormented
Daily defeated by you
Just when I thought I'd reached the bottom ...
I'm dying again
I'm going under
Drowning in you
I'm falling forever I've got to break through
Blurring and stirring the truth and the lies
So I don't know what's real and what's not
Always confusing the thoughts in my head
So I don't trust myself anymore
So go on and scream
Scream at me I'm so far away
I won't be broken again
I've got to breathe I can't keep going under ...
Evanesence*

The majestic water lily remained closed as if wanting to taunt the women, or make them come forward. But they had to be patient, as they now were

much used to; however, tempers flared in both of them. They had come such a long, hard way and time was running out ...

As if their unspoken thoughts had been heard, the giant pearl pink leaves slowly opened themselves, only to show more splendid leaves. Layer upon layer was unfolded.

The heart of the flower was darker; purple pink and in the middle of all those petals stood a person, a delicate slender curvy woman. She wore a long, scarlet-dark brown wrapped skirt, showing her curves perfectly; she had round, well-shaped hips and a narrow waist, her olive skin shoulders and back were bare. Because she was standing with her back towards them and because of the high blue collar they could only see the back of her head, with its raven black hair, shining and healthy with a blue glow.

She raised one slender arm and a golden bracelet in the shape of a snake circled around her arm as if it was alive. It moved for sure. And then she turned ...

This was the moment they long had been waiting for. Finally, they would see the face of the much feared and spoken of woman: queen and sorceress of Dochas, the Dominator to the Silent Folk; Sempervirens.

When she turned dramatically, for she knew she was being watched, a heavy but sweet perfume much like that of opium filled the air. And at last they saw her face; olive skinned, young with delicate dark features. Her cheekbones were set high and her mouth was scarlet and luscious, perfectly shaped; neither thin nor full. Her ebony chin-length hair waved alluringly around her soft feminine chin. She looked about their age and in body equally young; only her eyes, set high above her cheekbones and almond shaped, shone bright like two warm coals, spoke differently. Sparkling and strong, those eyes stared at them in a worldly

all-knowing fashion with a flare of arrogance that came along with knowledge. One of her thin, curved, black eyebrows rose and her mouth formed an approving smile when she met their staring wide-open eyes. Drowning in her presence they were speechless.

Not at all had they been expecting this. Old yes, fragile and decrepit most likely; and frightful. How wrong had they been? They should have known better, that viciousness did not necessarily mean a person lacked outer beauty.

But of course she has been using her powers to change her appearance as well, why wouldn't she? But then again why would she if there are no other people and no one to admire her beauty? Artride pondered. *But then again she had her workers; her slaves and probably lots of mirrors to admire herself in. If no one else loved her, she had to love herself enormously.* And seeing her, that wasn't hard to imagine.

And then her voice ...

'So ... you've made it? How very wonderful.' It was the voice you would expect from a goddess; clear and flawless with depth, not from a mortal. But of course she was no mortal anymore. It had sounded a little sarcastic.

Both women were stunned and could still not utter a word, although no other magic than the sorceress' natural beauty was present. It made Sempervirens smile again, while she calmly stepped out of the opened water lily.

'Has it been ... very hard to find me?' and she laughed a high pretty laugh. She was very charismatic in her self-confidence, and waves of power radiated from her.

Slowly she stepped closer, her feet in delicate black slippers with laces wrapped around her long tanned legs up to her knees, which only

showed when she walked. The skirt was of a beautiful shiny scarlet and ebony fabric with a brown almost gold pattern around the hem, following her form perfectly. It slid along her broad hips and legs, ending just above her calves, with a long slit at one side right up to her small waist, showing her bare hip, while above her waist her navel contained a marvellous tiny ruby.

Around her delicate neck she wore a high blue collar. Her breasts were full and firm underneath a spray of golden jewellery, with several layers and again a snake on top that bit her own tail. That was all that covered her chest. Sparse but simple; however, enough to justify her beauty. She not only looked very tempting in her outfit, but gracious and supreme at the same time.

Stopping before Artride she looked her straight in the eyes with a disdainful look, as if she wanted to say; "I do not need a crown to show others I am a queen."

Artride hadn't looked in a mirror lately, not a normal one at least, to check herself and feel secure enough about her own appearance. Not ever had she felt so insecure, tiny and subdued. Compared to this woman she was a worm; well, at least that's how she felt.

Tirsa understood what she was doing and touched Artride's arm slightly to give her comfort and acknowledgment.

Sempervirens turned to Tirsa when she saw the simple but kind gesture and laughed a dirty laugh, putting her down; making fun of them. It was upsetting and it made Tirsa flush with anger.

'I am no illusion, Artride. I am real,' she said lusciously with that same smile, and gave her a wink. Suddenly she knew this was the same person who played the woman of the lake and she saw that Artride knew it too.

Both their mouths fell open when Sempervirens snapped her fingers and the scenery changed; ferns and pine trees started to grow until they were tall. And then ivy started to tangle around the trees and the forest floor. Orchids showed themselves from underneath; scented and with huge mouths and all imaginable colours. The forest was perfect, and it reminded Tirsa of the woods of her youth back in Zoria.

‘Perhaps this is a little more suitable to your liking?’ And she picked a purple flower from one of the orchids and smelled it.

‘Hmm, lovely is it not?’ and she glanced at the blonde young woman who stood staring around, breathing in the scenery, real or not, she loved it.

‘Although ... something is missing,’ the woman spoke. ‘Hmm, I know.’ And she snapped her fingers and beautiful birds of paradise came flying and began to nestle themselves in the trees, colourful and strange in their beauty, before singing wonderful sweet songs.

Between the green stood an ebony, elusive throne, overgrown with ivy and there Sempervirens sat down before snapping her fingers again, continuing her show, very amused with herself. Next, two young men appeared with only a silk dark blue loin cloth to cover their manhood; one with warm auburn hair and the other almost as black as her own, but of course their skin was green, green as ivy. They both came walking towards their queen carrying a jug of what they assumed was red wine and three glasses; stopping at her feet, kneeling in front of her, bowing low.

‘Oh no,’ Tirsa whispered alarmed. *More Woodchildren males ...*

Crossing her long legs, deliberately showing a bit of her dark olive skin, she beckoned to the men and they came to sit either side of her on the floor, she stroked the brown hair of one of them and the other on his well muscled arm. They were like her beloved pets. They smiled contentedly at

her touch and seemed alright in this environment, or her presence, either way. They were as stunning as she was.

‘Satisfied?’ she asked looking in their direction.

Artride opened her dry mouth, but swallowed, had wanted to say, *Right, now that you’ve shown us you can do magic* – but again found no voice.

‘Please sit down, both of you.’

Artride looked around to find something like a chair, but couldn’t. Of course, if they were worms they had to sit on the floor. Tirsa did not mind, for she already sat comfortably enough.

‘Well, you’ve come a long way to find me. Shouldn’t you at least introduce yourselves?’

The women exchanged confused glances, and it was obvious Artride was too battered to speak, so Tirsa made use of the moment.

‘I presume you are well aware of who we are, thank you, but it is no trouble for me to repeat the name of my Queen Artride Cumhachd of Ceartas,’ and she nodded in her direction. ‘And myself, Tirsa Lathabris.’ Pointing at herself.

Sempervirens narrowed her eyes slightly at her words, but for the rest seemed untouched.

‘Welcome to my world,’ she laughed enticingly; making use of her splendour.

‘It is true, I am well aware of who you are and why you’re here of course. How could I have missed it?’

‘And is it true you knew this days ago, and had us looking for you since we first found our way through the cave. Perhaps even when we first entered Dochas?’ Tirsa asked.

‘Hush, I will tell you when you are allowed to speak,’ she spoke sternly.

Tirsa got up instead. ‘I just want to know that if you knew, why you didn’t show your face sooner? It could have saved us a lot of trouble.’

‘I warn you not to talk like this to me. That is no way to talk to a queen. For you must be aware by now I am the Queen of Dochas.’

‘No way to ...’ she repeated hotly and she glanced at Artride. ‘Next to me sits a true queen and I do not remember you ever treating her like one; not even at this very moment do you acknowledge a true queen! A true queen; not one by her own doing!’ Artride shook her head in warning at her, and Tirsa bit her lip scornfully.

Sempervirens features dimmed and her brown eyes froze cold. She only gave Tirsa one icy look and that was enough to make her fall backwards. She had felt a freezing cold, heavy touch on her chest. At a loss for words she remained seated while Artride seemed to wake up and gave her a worried glance.

Smiling she ordered one of her slaves to do something, and immediately the darker lad of the two stood up, to come back with glass goblets filled with wine. First, he gave one to his queen, then one to each of the women. Tirsa tried to make eye contact, but it was impossible since he walked with a bowed head and eyes lowered.

‘Did you like the drama I’ve created for you?’ and she smiled wickedly, not expecting an answer. She continued, ‘So, let us start again, shall we?’ Sempervirens said smiling, sipping her wine. ‘It has been a while since I last had guests and I want this to go smoothly.’

Like all the rest. Artride thought grimly.

‘First I do admire your perseverance and courageousness highly. It is very rare these days. And second is it important to know that everything

about your journey had a purpose; a very personal purpose, as you suspected correctly. I am very pleased you made it.'

'Now that that is settled,' Artride started, 'and we have been formally introduced, and as you say we have made it and found you this far, surely we could ask a favour from you?'

Sempervirens' face was serene and emotionless, compared to that of Artride which showed every emotion. 'You know I've got the power, but you wonder if I have the heart to help you?'

She swallowed as her heart jumped, and nodded. 'Please help us. Make our journey worth it.'

'How touching! You really do look vulnerable and so very ... naked.' And after one snap of her fingers the cloth of the curtains wrapped around them, before disappearing into thin air. Both women looked upset.

'Why ever did you do that?' Tirsa snapped.

'You came here naked and that is how you shall stay until it is completed,' she answered back coldly, taking another sip.

'Why, I do not understand ...' Artride said startled.

'No, you do not. Hmm, only after you truly understand your own nakedness you are worth the prettiest clothes, but not these torn veils of course.'

'We have lost almost everything on our journey, and you came close to taking away our dignity, but I am not ashamed of my body,' Artride said, and she stood up, showing herself.

'For I am beautiful.'

Sempervirens smiled pleasantly with one eye jerked up appealingly. 'Why yes indeed; no one ever said you weren't. You wouldn't be anything else, now would you?'

‘Why so? Only appealing people have a chance to come here?’ she asked confused.

She smiled again. ‘If you put it like that.’ Which meant a yes for sure.

‘And are we worthy enough to receive our prize now?’ Tirsa asked. Is that why we’ve been faced with these personal tests? To be worthy? Was that your purpose?’

Sempervirens had looked dull and a little bored, but now all of a sudden she looked alarmed and cautious.

‘My, my, you really only have one thing on your mind don’t you? Praise you!’ and she raised her glass to them before taking another sip. The two women, however, did not touch their drinks.

‘Well, that remains to be seen,’ she added and giggled.

‘What do you mean? Do we not deserve a counter spell after all you’ve put us through?’ Artride asked. ‘Gods, you have played with our minds, our souls and our bodies! What more do you want from us? What more do we have to do for you? You; who can do magic and make anything happen to please yourself and create your own little world with! Who needs other souls to still your hunger if you can do all this? How more cruel can one get?’

‘Oh, believe me. You’ve seen nothing yet,’ the sorceress answered untouched. ‘This is mere illusion.’

‘Yes, illusion and tricks! Tell us what more you ask from us,’ Tirsa interrupted.

‘Everything in its own time.’

‘That is our problem you see, we don’t have time. My brother is to be hanged within ... I guess what must be one week or so by now. So if you please!’

‘Yes, time. Mortals are so obsessed with that. I almost forgot. What a pity.’

‘Well, not if you live a thousand years perhaps, but we don’t have that long,’ Tirsa said, annoyed.

‘You are my guests! I want you to relax; have a hot bath, a nice meal and a drink or two. I also noticed you look very tired; now that is not to be recommended if you want to retain your beauty. So a good long sleep would do the trick. And a relaxing massage. Let us talk later, ladies,’ she spoke as though she did not have a care in the world, which was probably right.

‘That is very kind of you,’ Artride responded, staying friendly, ‘but like Tirsa said, we are in a bit of a hurry. Lives *are* truly at stake. Now, I do not know if you remember what it is like to feel pain, discomfort or even the threat of death hanging over your head? But I can assure you; if I can make that torment shorter I will do everything that lies in my power.’

‘Hmm, yes. Compassion; a weakness of the human state.’

‘No, not a weakness,’ Artride commented. ‘It is our strength; something which sets us apart from the cold-hearted and the ignorant.’

‘Is it truly? When it affects you nearly as much as the tormented and can put your own life at risk? What good can that do? No, I say it is a weakness for without it, you are truly free. And then you can work on other higher goals.’

Both Tirsa and Artride felt angered and wanted to argue with the woman, but it was Artride that stood.

‘Such as what? Indulge in yourself, your power, gold and glory, here all alone with abducted people to serve *you*? I’ve never met a more selfish person in my entire life! What good can magic do if not to serve *others*?’

‘Did you come here to judge me or to get something from me?’ she reminded Artride with narrowed eyes.

Yes, they had to be careful what they said.

‘I’m sorry,’ Artride said honestly. ‘I just do not get it. With your power ... well why don’t I just shut up?’

‘Very wise.’ And she took another slow sip of her wine in thought. Artride sat down again.

‘It looks like you are indeed worthy of your title; there is no doubt about that. You want to defend your kingdom, end the people’s suffering, take control of your own life and theirs. You’ve got what it takes to be a queen.’

Artride’s face lit up.

‘But of course that’s not why you’re here and I can’t be bothered with titles.’

‘But why did the journey have to be so difficult? It looked like you wanted to stop us, why?’ Tirsa asked. Sempervirens smiled slyly.

‘The easy way is never the fun way. And I had a splendid time watching you. Do you know you are the first humans who ever made it this far in seeking my home? Do you know what that means?’

‘No, what?’ Artride shook her head curiously.

‘That you are the first people to see me in my element, my world!’ and she started laughing madly.

The queen sighed. ‘And what about them?’ she pointed at the Woodchildren.

‘They aren’t humans as you must know! They feel more, know more ...’ and she smiled at them with understanding; sharing something they only knew.

And are harder to control; the harder the challenge the better for you ... she thought. *They are worthy too.*

‘And they serve me well, very well.’

‘I see,’ Artride said, ignoring the sexual hint. ‘So it is true you dislike humans and you really don’t want them here. But we made it, despite your traps. Now what?’

‘Ah, rest my dears, rest first and then we’ll talk.’

Artride sighed, ignoring her. ‘Both of us could have died.’

‘Ah, but you always had a choice to turn back. I haven’t invited you. You knew the risks when you entered my domain and you accepted them. Free will, remember?’

‘But you knew we couldn’t, so you had all the power and have been playing with us.’

‘Don’t you ever forget that.’

‘So, since I’m worthy of being a queen, and we’ve passed all your tests, may we have our reward?’ Artride hissed angrily.

‘After your hard journey and its very entertaining elements, I’d say you do deserve something.’

It felt good to hear that, but still they felt used and hurt. Artride tried not to think about that anymore or that someone could actually extract pleasure from hurting others. It was too far removed from her own standards.

‘But I do not give away spells that easily of course.’

Tirsa sighed. I knew it wasn’t over.

‘And this is a very special and a very powerful one; ancient and powerful. In fact from my own days amongst mortals.’

‘But ... would you be able to lift the curse on the Law Book of Ceartas? she daringly asked, knowing the sorceress could die the instant

she heard it.

Sempervirens gave Artride another disdainful look. 'Of course I can, the counter spell however, is for you to find.'

'What, how?' Artride incredulously asked.

'You are saying it already exists within your cave?' Tirsa added questionably.

'Right, ladies, enough talking, let me escort you to your chambers.'

'After all we've been through you want us to find our 'reward' ourselves?' Artride asked.

'If you do not agree you can refuse naturally, I shan't force you. However, you must understand I cannot let you go, now that you have seen me. I know you can keep a secret, but still ... if more people come to try my tests, however difficult, but fun for me ... well no. But if you hear what I have to offer you, you will have no desire to return.'

'We'll be just like your other slaves,' Tirsa guessed.

Sempervirens looked angry at her, but regained her calm composure fast.

'Like them, you'll have everything you desire; every imaginable wish I can fulfill.'

'Illusions and captivity,' Artride commented.

'No, not entirely. What I have to offer you, is the ultimate prize for your efforts. My slaves can only dream about that.'

'And all that for us, humans?' Artride asked incredulously.

'You do not believe me. Like I said, you are no ordinary humans, but capable of many things.'

Artride suddenly remembered what the Windchild Kasching had warned them of; either they could try to understand this woman or end up like her. Not much choice there. So, Sempervirens admired their courage

and strength? Well, she would if no one ever made it this far. And now she wouldn't let them leave? But if they chose to look for the spell, she would?

Somehow they both doubted she would ever let them leave with their gained knowledge.

'So, if we find the counter spell, you will let us go, even with all we know?' Artride asked.

'If you choose so, yes, but I doubt you will by then. Why would you want to go back to all that darkness out there if I can offer you light and clarity?'

I don't trust her, Tirsa pondered. She loves herself too much to give anything to another person, earned or not. What will she get out of this?

'Alright, one last test to find the spell. The gods know how much we need it. On one condition: it is going to be a safe test. I do not want any more dangers; no monsters, no thunderstorms, snow, rain or ice, no guards, no riddles, heat and swamps, breaking bridges, prison cells and nightmares,' Artride said.

Sempervirens smiled, content with herself.

'Honey, you'll be as safe as a baby in its mother's womb.'

Artride blushed at that, and waited with hungry eyes for their instructions.

'Seek, seek and thy will find!' And she laughed. 'It worked before!'

Silence.

'That's it?' Tirsa asked confused. 'We've seen how big it is in here, where on Talamh are we going to look? It's a maze!'

'I shall guide you in the right direction; after that it's up to you. I keep all my ancient spells in a secret chamber and it's up to you to find it. It's not impossible. It can be done, especially by the likes of you.'

‘A chamber. We shall find it. How long do you give us?’ Artride asked.

‘All the time you need.’ And she spread her arms wide; making the golden snake on her arms move slowly. Both women understood the hidden sneer.

‘So you’d better go, it is that way. I’ll be watching you,’ she almost sang.

They looked in the direction of a green curtain. Towards the part of the cave they hadn’t been yet.

‘We’re already used to that,’ Artride said.

‘I still think it’s not fair,’ Tirsa said to her queen.

‘Is life ever fair?’ Sempervirens asked.

Tirsa turned around to face the sorceress. ‘Life isn’t good or bad; so fair is not the right word if we’re talking about life. We people make things happen! The way we treat others, the smiles we give, the joy we bring, but also the hurt. We do either positive or negative things. But everything we do has an effect in the world, however small. I know now that we are responsible for our own actions and if we’ve messed up, we should clean up after ourselves. Make it better, fix it. People should help instead of torment each other.’

Artride looked proudly at her friend and Sempervirens glanced with her dark eyes at her. A smile painted her face as she nodded in agreement.

‘Right, and remember ... I’m helping you,’ she said.

Are you really? Tirsa thought and grabbed the veils, Sempervirens had ripped off them, from the floor.

~ ~ ~

Covering themselves behind the green curtain with their make-do dresses, they found brown-grey walls again; the cave for what it really was. Perhaps Sempervirens had no business in this part. She wouldn't if she never had any use for spells herself; all she had to do was snap her pretty fingers it seemed. But why she did have spells stored was another question. She did mention they were ancient; so that could mean at one point at the start of her 'career' she did use them.

'I hate her for putting us through this again,' Tirsa mentioned softly.

'I don't care. All I want is to get this spell and go home,' Artride wearily pointed out.

There were ancient wall paintings in black and red; some lovely, but others scary. They tried not to stare at the images; for the pictures became more and more alarming, with all sorts of monsters and frightening looking people.

Unexpected, they walked into a closed wall.

'I didn't see that coming!' Artride announced upset, having taken the full blow, rubbing her painful knees and hands.

'Me neither. I could have sworn it was going further. You ok?' the other woman said rubbing her sore shoulder.

'Wait, maybe we do have to look at the disturbing paintings. I mean, nothing in this cave seems to be here without a reason. She even said so herself,' Artride stated, which made Tirsa wonder too. 'I guess so, since there is no other way, but back ...'

And they examined the pictures further; especially the ones on the closed wall in front of them. Perhaps it was a doorway? All they had to do was search for the key.

‘They are hideous!’ Tirsa said. ‘I don’t understand what all these monsters have to do with the beauty of the rest of the cave.’

‘Maybe that’s the clue,’ Artride said. ‘For everything in nature there is a counterpart; light and dark, day and night, spring and autumn, and so on. There has to be a balance. Kasching said she has been working against nature, but even she cannot completely outwit it. It seems to me for her magic to work, she has been hiding her own demons and monsters in the form of these pictures on these walls. Once drawn she is rid of them perhaps? A way of therapy. I bet she never comes in this part. So she won’t have to look at it and deal with them. This must be her darkness; maybe even her past or something.’

‘Hmm, you could be right. Something terrible must have happened to her. Just look at the shape and size of these terrible beings. They all seem to shoot fire from their eyes, now why is that?’ and she touched the shapes lightly, wondering. They were almost like the huge red demon from before who could not fight his own inner demons.

‘Eyes ... fire,’ Artride said looking thoughtful. ‘I bet these are people from her past you know; bad people, staring at her with red fire in their eyes ... Anger or lust, perhaps both.’ And she remembered with dread and fear the nightmares she had had in her prison.

The walls seemed redder too as they illuminated an angry sort of deep crimson.

‘I don’t like this,’ Tirsa announced, shattered.

The light grew and dimmed, and grew and dimmed again; almost like a heartbeat and with it a deep low beat coming closer and vanishing, coming closer and vanishing.

Artride started pushing the solid wall with the paintings. No movement, no change.

‘I do not see any target for these beasts.’ she said, following the flames with her fingers, and just as she had said that, a huge ball of fire came flying out from behind towards them. Just in time they managed to jump aside as the fire crashed and burned into the wall with a loud booming sound. With a roar like thunder the wall collapsed and fell into pieces of broken stone, crumbling to the floor.

‘You got your target, now let’s go,’ Tirsa said alarmed as they jumped over the rocks and continued on their way.

Behind the opened crushed wall were more paintings, on either side of the walls of the passage; demons *and* angels this time, and prettier and so a little less frightening. There was also a huge marvellous angel with dark skin. His wings were closed and his face serene, but he looked a little sad as well.

‘He is beautiful.’ And Artride touched the cold stone to caress his face. Suddenly Tirsa pushed her to the wall saying, ‘Don’t Artride! Last time a fireball barely missed you!’ and both stumbled against the wall with the dark angel. And as they did the wall gave way too; slowly but steadily the wall moved inside!

Accompanied by a low stone-on-stone sound it had only opened a little, so after exchanging an understanding determined look they pushed it further open.

A cold shudder ran down Tirsa’s spine when they entered a big room with shelves all the way up to the ceiling, littered with books. Other than that the room contained round tables bearing unknown items.

Was this the chamber where Sempervirens held her spells? Looking at the books both women seemed to think the same as they at once walked over to the bookshelves. Artride began searching low while Tirsa stepped on the ladder leaning against the shelves to examine the higher placed

books. Thumb-leafing through the first book; Tirsa noticed it was all in the old tongue, which she only understood a few words and phrases of. Looking at Artride she knew she was facing the same problem.

‘How are we going to find out which line refers to a spell, not to mention our wanted counter spell?’

Tirsa’s mouth thinned and her forehead wrinkled in thought. ‘I know a few words.’

Artride smiled at her feeling a little guilty; for she surely had wanted it to sound uplifting, but obviously had failed in accomplishing that. Tirsa must have her breaking point too.

‘Alright, that’s a start. I will get the books and take a first look. We should make a pile of ‘possible spell books’ and a pile of ‘definitely not’. I give them to you for further examination. If you come across any indication of a spell, put it on the ‘possible spell book’ pile.’

They swapped places and started their search. Almost every book Artride gave her she then had to throw on the ‘definitely not’ pile. She roughly leafed through them and happened to notice that most of them were history and story books. Books about the Silent Folk were rare and if it weren’t for their lack of time Tirsa would want to read them, or even take one with her if she was allowed. The thought crossed her mind that if she stayed with Sempervirens she could read them all, and Sempervirens probably would give her eternal life so she would never have to worry again about lack of time or having more important things to do. That thought shocked her and she was horrified to discover this selfish trade in herself. Never, during their journey, had she had such a disturbing, selfish thought. What was she thinking! Was she getting egocentric? Maybe she was just enchanted by the self-indulged sorceress and her great power that she began to think like her.

Maybe she could come back after her task was over and her brother saved ...

Stop thinking like that!

‘Something wrong?’ Artride asked, worried about the absent-minded look on her partner’s face.

Tirsa shook her shoulders to get rid of her disturbing thoughts. ‘No, not at all.’ And she glanced at the remaining books on the shelves and at the small pile of ‘possible spell books’ which she had to examine further afterwards.

‘I just don’t happen to come across many spell books.’

‘Well, we only need one,’ and she gave her another book with a hopeful expression.

She is so good. It is like she is dedicated to friendliness. After all the things Sempervirens put us through and did to us, to her ... But she remembered Artride had only one goal in mind; their task and she would not risk anything anymore to lose it now they had come so far. She would even endure humiliation.

Hours later the pile of spell books had grown to eight thick books and the shelves were empty now. The floor was scattered with the rest of the useless books, for the many piles had fallen over and the women sat on top of them to rest a bit while Tirsa was examining the eight books. They had the look of spell books because they had long strange sentences, with lots of space between the lines.

‘A cree ... a cree a cooshla ma cree,’ Tirsa read.

‘What does that mean, Tirsa?’

‘My heart, my heart, my wounded heart,’ she translated.

‘It doesn’t sound like a spell, but then again what does? O, you wicked being change into a bug?’ Artride joked, but her face was screwed

up ready to cry, not to laugh.

‘Perhaps. The Silent Folk never told me about spells and we only have those clichés of sentences you just mentioned out of the stories we know; but what is true? This here sounds more like poetry to me.’ And she read on.

‘Hmm, definitely poetry, beautiful mind you.’

‘Really? I would love to hear some, but no, we have little time. Now what about this one?’

Tirsa tried the next book, but after several pages she came to the conclusion it was a cooking book; for names of vegetables and ingredients were written on the pages.

‘No ingredients to create a spell?’ Artride tried.

‘These are normal herbs and vegetables, no secret ingredients and mixing them like this would create nothing magical.’

‘But what is magic exactly, Tirsa? I mean, how do you define magic?’

Tirsa stared at her for a moment, trying to read her intentions, but they were pure as ever.

‘Well, magic is something special. To alter something in such a way that is different from anything else; it is change. To change the very element of something or someone into something else. And in order to do so, you need a very trained mind or a gifted mind like yours; who was born with the healing gift which is magic as well.’ And she looked down at her hands, looking away from Artride’s face and revealing body. ‘And perhaps certain magical items are required; ingredients and a certain combination of words? But it’s the person who does magic, or the intention so to speak, that matters. The Silent Folk divide magic in intentions; doing positive helpful things or tricky fun things to cause someone trouble; but never

pain or lasting damage. I guess when magic falls into the wrong hands, like that of ill-minded humans, magic turns into bad or even selfish intentions.'

Artride nodded pensively. 'And I had thought a counter spell; to undo magic, would be so much harder to create. But Sempervirens makes it sound so easy. It doesn't feel right somehow.' And she stared at the books. 'To find such a powerful spell amongst these cooking and poetry books?' Tirsa agreed with her, but they searched on for they had no other option.

The rest of the books were either poetry or cookery books.

They both sighed, beaten. Artride began looking around after a while to study the strange objects on the tables, while Tirsa still leafed through the books, searching. Glittering earrings, which when you picked them up or when they moved slightly, shot falling stars gently. 'How lovely!' and she had an urge to keep them, but put them back wisely. The tables were spread about with candles on top in pretty odd looking chandeliers, the green candles did not seem to burn up, but remained the same size all the time with a steady bright flame. 'Well, that's handy!' and she suppressed the feeling of picking one of these up too.

She walked along the tables looking for another clue while Tirsa remained seated trying to concentrate and clear her head, hoping an answer would come. Doing so, she darted her eyes around the room and upwards so that her eyes fell on a small corner of a book which they had not seen yet. She jumped to her feet and craned her neck to see it lay lonely on the top shelf in the far corner of the room. She called out for Artride.

When Tirsa had climbed the wooden ladder she reached out for the big black book; but her arms weren't long enough to grab it. Artride held

on to the ladder while the blonde woman stepped on the highest step. The ladder was a little wobbly now, even though Artride did her best to hold it steady. But still she could not reach the book. She looked down and stepped a few steps lower and searched the room for a tool.

‘There!’ she pointed out happily. Artride saw the iron pole Tirsa was pointing at in one of the corners and walked away to get it. Carefully, Artride picked the cold, long metal pole up and found it surprisingly heavy to lift. ‘It weighs tons!’ and with a lot of effort she dragged it along the stone floor. The metal made a high scraping sound against the stone.

‘Would it be a weapon of sorts?’ Artride asked and checked its blunt point at both sides.

‘If that’s a weapon, I am a sorceress!’ she laughed and helped her lift it.

Together they managed to lift the heavy rod a few steps up the ladder with Tirsa climbing it.

But now came the most difficult part, lifting it up to hit the book so it would fall.

Artride had an idea and went to get another ladder and placed it beside that of her partner. Now she could help her lift it. ‘Now push!’ she ordered and together they pushed the pole to the left side of the book. The book moved a little.

‘Again!’ Artride instructed. And once more they pushed the book and again it shoved a little more to the side of the wooden shelf.

Three times more they had to push it before it finally lost its balance and dropped to the floor; however, not only the book; but Artride’s ladder lost its balance as well! Her ladder fell to the right and she held on to it, but shouted a warning. She hit Tirsa’s ladder and both saw the floor coming towards them rapidly.

With a thud and a crack of the wooden ladders they landed on the floor. Tirsa took most of the blow, but landed surprisingly well on her thigh. Artride landed half on top of her ladder with a cry.

They gathered themselves, rearranging their veils, rubbing their limbs.

‘More bruises and cuts,’ Tirsa said briskly, rubbing her thigh. She looked at the queen whose hands were bloody, cut on the broken ladder.

‘Let me have a look at them.’

‘I’ll be fine, no splinters, I think.’ And Artride licked the cuts to stop the bleeding. Her bodyguard ripped off a piece of her green veil and dressed Artride’s hands as best she could, trying not to look at the queen’s nearly exposed full breasts.

Looking down at Tirsa’s thigh where Tirsa had fallen a reddish mark was forming, Artride noticed for the first time a long, white vertical scar.

‘A nasty scar you got there. How did you get that?’

She made a knot in the bandage and looked down at her own thigh, rubbing it in an attempt to cover it, shrugging her shoulders.

‘Some years ago. I just started out as a soldier. You take the first few blows and learn. A reminder of my foolish days.’ And she locked her eyes on the big black book lying silently on the floor, so she wouldn’t have to look into Artride’s examining eyes on her.

Curiously she kneeled down by it and brushed away the dust on its cover. There once more a golden image of a snake biting its own tail showed itself, painted on the black velvet cover. The book looked ancient, but somehow the symbol did not. It looked as if it was younger than the book.

Brushing away more dust from the symbol itself; they spotted tiny golden letters beneath the snake. Tirsa bent over closer, piercing her eyes sharp to read the words, while Artride discovered a golden lock on the side of the thick book. Its leaves that were visible there, were yellow brown, marked by time.

‘As if this room and all in it is affected by time and the rest of the cave isn’t,’ Artride muttered and touched the lock, examining it.

‘Can you understand it?’ she asked Tirsa who was still focused on the small strange letters.

‘It’s the same language; the official tongue of the Silent Folk or TalamhClann in their speech. Some even believe humans spoke this language ages ago and others even go further and state we are related to one another, that we have in fact the same origin.’

Artride stared with big eyes at her. ‘Really? Like we are related to animals?’

‘Yes, we are all spirit and body; but we and the Silent Folk are mammals, humanoid. Apart from Windchildren who are just spirit and have, as you have seen, an illusion of a body. It even feels like one.’

How would she know? Artride thought curiously, but commented, ‘Well, you wouldn’t let me touch him, so I wouldn’t know,’ she remarked slightly irritably, but soon she smiled warmly at her again; making clear she didn’t really hold it against her.

Tirsa smirked back and then turned the book over and to the front again.

‘I’ve read stories about a great war between the species, magic against steel.’

‘The Great War.’ Artride commended.

‘You know it?’

‘My father had me read a lot of ancient folklore, and at the time I took it for a fairy tale, like I did with the Silent Folk, but now I begin to wonder. But I always saw it as a warning, though, made up or not.’ And suddenly she locked onto Tirsa’s eyes, who felt warm and cold at the same time.

‘Did the Silent People never mention this to you?’ Artride asked.

‘I am afraid not. They always seem to live more in the present than in the past, unlike humans.’

‘Hmm, well what can you make out of this? Is it the spell book we need, do you think?’

Tirsa studied the words. ‘It says something about waking someone up.’

‘What? What exactly does it say?’ the queen asked her.

‘Wake me up. I’m inside. Call ... my name and save me ... from the dark. And then this last sentence beneath says: bring me back ... to life.’

‘Who would that be? Sempervirens? Do we have to save her? She is after all lost,’ said Artride pondering.

‘No, I do not think this refers to her! Why would these lines be in this book? Wake me up, I’m inside? Inside, someone’s soul, spirit or inside this ... book? And who?’

‘It sounds like we have to resurrect someone from the dead or something.’ Artride said.

It was silent for a long moment.

‘Do you remember Roalda and Kasching mentioning this god who disappeared?’ Artride suddenly said excited. ‘I just had a vision. We have not seen him or heard any clue yet, but this here ... this could be something! Perhaps he is trapped and all we have to do is say his name ...’

‘And he will wake up ...’ Tirsa concluded and both women smiled happily at each other.

Artride placed her hand above the cover too and waited. Yes, she definitely could feel a hint of power radiating from the book.

‘It feels a bit like when I am stepping inside the sacred room where the Law Book is held,’ she said with a hint of fear in her eyes. It was the presence of magic. ‘Something very powerful indeed is inside this book,’ the queen whispered. ‘What I don’t understand is, if it is; why has it been put away to lie forgotten under a layer of dust? It is like it was left there for a reason. To be forgotten.’

‘Hmm. Now, what was his name again?’ Tirsa pondered aloud. ‘Elias?’ and she stared at Artride for help.

‘Something like that. Roalda made us remember his name. I think it was ... Eolas.’

Tirsa nodded with a flare of recognition on her face. With her hand on the book she opened her mouth. ‘Wait.’ Artride interrupted, putting her hand over hers. ‘What if we make things worse by waking him up? What if this god has turned to evil as well or is even worse?’

‘I believe it was you who said “Life is about taking risks?” ’

She withdrew her hand reluctantly and held still while Tirsa spoke the name of the god and they waited ...

CHAPTER 19

EOLAS

*My spirit sleeping somewhere cold until you find it there and lead it back
home*

Wake me up inside

I can't wake up

Call my name and save me from the dark

Bid my blood to run before I come undone

Save me from the nothing I've become

Now that I know what I'm without

You can't just leave me

Breathe into me and make me real

Bring me to life

Frozen inside without your touch without your love

Darling only you are the life among the dead

All this time I can't believe I couldn't see

Kept in the dark but you were right in front of me

I've been sleeping a thousand years it seems

Got to open my eyes to everything

Without a thought without a voice without a soul

Don't let me die there must be something more

Evanescence

A loud clinking sound was to be heard and the golden lock sprang open in countless small pieces. They both stiffened as Artride tried to turn the cover. Slowly as she lifted the heavy black cover she felt it being raised from under her hand by a heavy, warm gust of wind.

The breeze grew stronger and now, as the book lay open, it rushed along the pages wildly back and forth. A soft green light emerged from the pages. Artride, who had been sitting on her knees by the book, backed off instinctively.

After several minutes the book finally became calm. The only difference was that it lay open in the middle, completely still. There was a certain tension in the air; like someone was holding their breath or ... began to breath.

A whispering started and some sort of soft moaning and sighing, but soon they recognized it as yawning. Someone was waking up; after a long deep sleep it seemed.

Both moved closer to the book again to read its ancient ink words on the brown worn paper.

‘It’s the same language,’ Tirsa whispered to Artride, reading the words on the opened two pages.

‘And these are definitely spells!’ she happily concluded.

‘This must be the spell book Sempervirens wants us to bring to her,’ she whispered back.

‘Who are you?’ a voice sounded suddenly; deep and rich. It had come from the book! It had sounded surprised, but not unfriendly.

They backed away again with open mouths, too startled to speak.

The male voice repeated his question when he did not hear a reply.

‘Don’t be afraid. I cannot hurt you, not that I desire to. All I wish to know is who woke me up.’ And they heard him yawn again.

‘Artride Cumhachd and Tirsa Lahabris,’ Artride answered him plainly.

‘Hmm, Cumhachd you said? Royalty? Tell me whose daughter you are.’

‘Well, I am daughter to Macdin Cumhachd of Ceartas.’

‘Macdin? And who are his parents?’

‘Look, I do not have time to describe my family tree. Why are you asking me this anyway?’

‘Because I want to know how long I’ve been away for.’

Artride, who felt strange talking to a book, looked at Tirsa, who reminded her it was the god Eolas she was talking to.

‘According to Roalda you were seen last about two centuries ago,’ she answered.

‘Ah, you have met Roalda, then you must be more than simple mortals. Surely you are witches?’ and he sighed regretfully. ‘Has it been that long?’

‘Sorry, this is Tirsa here. I thought time did not matter for immortals,’ Tirsa interpreted.

‘Greetings Tirsa. No, usually it does not. However, now precious time has been wasted while I’ve been sleeping too long within this book where she trapped me; unable to get out, or do my work. I am Eolas, god of insight, but of course you know that.’

‘Hmm, yes. We suspected as much when we read those words on the cover. Please to meet you, Eolas. Can you see us?’ Artride asked, and examined the book closer.

‘I’m afraid not. I’m as blind as a worm.’

‘What a cruel thing to do! How can we help you?’ the queen asked.

‘You do not wish to know how she did this clever thing?’ Eolas wondered.

‘Of course we are curious, but we have very little time. Lives are at stake and –’

‘Just tell me where I am and where Sempervirens is and what’s happened in the time I have been ... away.’

Briefly they told him about what had happened with Dochas and the inhabitants; the protected dangerous spells and wards Sempervirens had cast, and the dreadful things she had done to them. And that the Silent Folk called her ‘The Dominator’ and that she wanted to be called queen. They also told him why they needed the powerful woman and that she promised them a counter spell on one last condition; that they had to find it themselves.

‘That’s how we found the book and ... you.’ Artride said.

‘Hmm, well I’m glad you did. However, I had hoped it would have been her who woke me up. So ... she has not changed like I wished she would. In fact she has gotten worse and quite ... self-indulgent.’

‘You are too mild,’ Tirsa grumbled.

‘At least she promised to give us the spell,’ Artride stated. ‘But I am certain that it is not something she will do out of kindness. From what I can tell, she only cares for herself and her vanity. So, you knew her well, back then?’

‘Indeed I did; the only one who really got close to her, but I let myself be fooled by her and –’

‘Don’t tell me ... by her appearance?’ Tirsa asked and rolled her eyes.

He sighed mournfully, and with longing, like he still cared much for her.

‘When I met her, I was instantly struck by her natural grace and beauty. You’ve seen her so you must understand, and for me as a man ... I know as a god I cannot let any mortal get close enough to come between me and my work. However, it was not only her looks that had got me

enchanted. I am utterly honest when I say I'd never met anyone quite like her in my entire long life of more than a thousand years. She had so much potential; she was truly gifted with great powers, even at such a young age. With it she could not only do splendid things, but really mean something in the wheel of life itself. Yes, the power to change the world. Even to become a goddess herself. I thought I met my counter half, well I still do. It's a shame that she turned over to – let's say ... the dark side.'

'So you are probably the only one who could have stopped her?' Tirsa asked.

'I have tried. I have tried so hard to change her mind, train her and guide her and not to use her precious powers to go against nature, but to work *with* it.' His deep voice turned soft again. 'It is much harder you see to go against it and very dangerous. She always liked a challenge.'

'How is it possible that she became so cruel?' Artride asked shaking her head.

'I can only say she was full of anger and bitterness when I first met her. Great pain and betrayal befell her. She used these fierce mind-blowing emotions to do magic. She already had mastered it a great deal, but she had no control whatsoever. I taught her to control her gift. She looked up to me and was really eager to learn more. I thought ... hoped she loved me.' There was sadness in his voice.

'But you must have seen it coming that she wanted to use her magic to do evil?' Tirsa asked.

She just used you!

'In the beginning yes, but I thought I had tamed her. She was a good student and soon learnt to do good things with her ability. She did for the time we were together. She made things grow, she healed, she gave life and love around her.' And he sighed again.

‘Together we were a great team.’

Artride stared at Tirsa for a short moment. She knew how he felt, really well.

‘I was so blinded by my love for her that I did not see it coming. Ironical, huh, for me as the god of *insight*?’

‘How come she is immortal if she is human, did you grant that to her?’ Tirsa asked.

‘She is not. I taught her a way to fool nature. I was self-absorbed too; for I wanted to keep her the way I met her; fresh and pure, healthy and stunning; young. To stay perfect by nature. She crossed that line between life and death, but it was me who gave her the instructions.’

‘Alright, so you blame yourself for the way she is today?’ Tirsa asked tiredly.

‘Indeed. I am responsible a great deal; I showed her the direction, but the path she took was of her own choosing. From what you told me she is still living with hatred in her heart and that is bad, really bad. I have always feared it would come back to haunt her.’

‘What happened to her that has made her into who she is today?’ Artride asked curiously, moving her legs to sit in a more comfortable position.

‘Are you sure you want to know?’

‘No, we don’t want to know,’ Tirsa interrupted. ‘All we want is to get this book to her, let her release our spell and head homeward.’ *And if I get the chance I’ll release her useless soul as well! But Artride does not need to know that.*

Artride glanced at her weary partner and bit her lip, looking down at the book with its trapped god.

‘Eolas, do you think it will matter?’

‘Matter? To know her story makes you understand her more and gives you an advantage. I am the only one who knows it, you will not hear it from anyone else. To know the truth about her could work in your favour.’

‘Why? You do not believe she will let us leave after she gives us the counter spell?’ Artride asked.

‘To be completely honest with you ... As I know her and from what you told me ... I do not believe she will give you any spell or your freedom for that matter. To have come this far has not done you any good, but her. She will use you for her own good; like she uses all for her own benefit. I’ve never met any one more self-absorbed.’

‘How can you know?’ Artride asked bewildered. ‘You’ve been trapped more than a century. True, if you were her partner you know her better than anyone, and she has done awful things for sure; however, you have not witnessed *everything* lately. She says she has our counter spell for the curse and will give it to us! She has to after all we have been through. She owes us that much, from queen to queen we have an agreement; even *she* understands she cannot break that!’

They heard him sigh.

Tirsa stared at the queen and looked dubiously. Artride did not know who to believe anymore; the evil sorceress who had done nothing so far to aid them; even if she did explain it was a test for their own good to be worthy of such a great prize. Or this god Eolas who certainly had a kind voice and was known by trustworthy Roalda who had not spoken ill of him. And he sounded like he was honest with them. Artride doubted visibly. Her mind was clouded by the lure of the counter spell she was promised.

‘Look, I would help you if I was free from this book; I would help and earn your trust somehow. But for now you simply have to believe what I tell you. This book is indeed a spell book; I created it myself and it even holds counter spells. Unfortunately ... it does not hold the much craved counter spell you desire.’

‘It has to,’ Artride said angrily. ‘We searched so hard. Is there no other chamber, no other book?’

‘I am afraid not. We did not use many books. This book, however, does have a formula to create *this* particular trap for a being inside a book and a powerful being like her *could* cast it of course. With her power it would not cost her too much trouble.’

‘But you say she won’t cast us a counter spell?’ Tirsa asked.

‘All I am saying is I know her, even if I have been away, and by the sounds of it she has not changed for the better.’

Artride looked devastated, and her companion laid a comforting hand on her arm.

‘I say we try and see for ourselves. Let’s take the book to her,’ Tirsa tried.

‘With me in it?’

‘Why not, only she can release you, is it not? Once released you can help us.’ Tirsa said hopefully.

‘Yes, but no. She will not be pleased to hear you have found and woken me up. It will surely endanger your chance of success, if not your downfall.’

‘How can you be so sure?’ Artride tried.

‘She wanted me dead, and knowing I cannot, being immortal, she had to try for another way to get rid of me. This was her way ...’

‘Alright then, not with the book. Let’s hear how we can demand her to make this spell for us,’ Tirsa said in a firm, but gentle voice. She had to act now.

‘Impossible. Once I was dear to her, but she never gave me anything she didn’t somehow gain from herself. She is in charge completely, and you have to be very subtle to ask anything from her. You have to make her believe it was *she* who came up with the idea or she won’t do anything for you. She has to be in control at all times, even if you have to make her believe she is. Do not forget this or it will surely be your downfall.’

‘What then do you suggest?’ Artride asked quietly.

‘I will tell you her background first, shortly, so you can decide for yourselves.’

‘If you believe it is relevant, go ahead,’ Artride remarked.

‘Why doesn’t she stop us if it is relevant?’ Tirsa asked looking around. ‘Doesn’t she see everything that’s going on in this cave?’

‘Not in this room, not while I still have some power. She knows that you have entered this room, but she still does not suspect you’ve found me. Curious though, the way she makes you believe there is a counter spell to be found here, of all places ... However, she cannot use any of her powers in here, so she cannot tell, not before you leave this room.’

‘She will be mad if she finds out; which is a good thing,’ Tirsa smiled.

‘So you better be prepared for her.’

And he told them the life of Sempervirens before she became the person they knew today:

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‘She grew up as an only child within a barbaric tribe, in a harsh, windswept sandy desert with little food but the tough desert animals. They killed all that walked and breathed. Her father was the brute head of this desert tribe and to put it mildly not very pleased his only child was a girl. He tried hard to father more children with every fertile woman of the tribe; claiming it was his right, since his own wife seemed not able to give him any more offspring. After years it was clear he was as barren as the land around him as none of the women of the tribe, which had received strict orders to remain chaste, gave birth. This angered him tremendously, and he fired his rage at the little girl. All the men and women were frightened of him; so they let him hurt the girl repeatedly. She was also considered to be bad luck and the bringer of misfortune; cursed they said, for since her coming the whole tribe was in trouble.

‘Rocks and rotten meat were thrown at her and foul language. At times of the hunt she was to be locked in a small barn, and often forgotten for days on end before someone finally remembered her and let her out; mostly her own mother, who in her darkened sad heart still remembered how happy she had been when she first looked the tiny fragile baby in the eyes and fed her. Those thoughts were dimmed quickly when she thought about the grim days after.

‘Over time, as the anger of the father did not pass but worsened as he saw how the skinny girl did not bend, nor break, but began to blossom and grow into a stubborn beautiful young woman, the other tribe members began to hate her even more and silently the other women envied her for her natural grace, endurance and beauty.

‘In this tribe the people did not grow very old; most were killed during the dangerous hunt or by the other violent tribe members. However, a lot of children were born in the years after her father gave up his pursuit,

as his main focus was his daughter. The days of the tribal leader began to come to an end as he grew weaker and weaker, and almost every day he sat drunk upon his stone throne. The daughter instead, looked healthier and stronger than ever, avoiding her people, but with a loathing for them so great as if she lived on that energy. It was a shame women were not supposed to be head of the tribe, so the others began once more to pity for the father who had not fathered a son. Even if he was an angry man the tribe had flourished well under his command before her coming. The young men began to fight and show the tribe leader who was the strongest to take his place. However, he did not care and that frustrated the members. He had no lust in choosing a successor.

‘Sempervirens, who at that time lived under a different name, still lived under his roof as a punch bag for all his faults, refusing to die, not even allowed to by the tribe, as her life was thought the best punishment. But, as her father became less and less interested in her in his growing dementia, she became stronger and began to make plans for the future, a future away from the tribe. She was only sixteen, but very mature for her age. The young men, who in their younger days had cast stones and scolded her, began to chase her now with a different kind of interest. Mostly, she could keep them at bay, but that angered the men even more. Many asked for her hand officially, so they could inherit the title by marrying her, but her father did not think her worthy enough still, and perhaps he still punished her by refusing her this much. She would not inherit the throne. However, nobody knew she had no such interest. Fact was, she still depended on the tribe for food and shelter, for in this harsh land a person on their own was a dead one. For all those years she endured the torture, when she could not flee, all the molesting and abuse. Because

she knew that one day it would all be different; and that day she would be free.

‘Living with a hate so intense and real, her only emotion left, she had made it her own. Growing more powerful she knew one day she would be ready to make her move, before they would finally kill her by breaking her spirit.’

‘One hot night when the tribe was in a deep sleep, a fire which was flamed by the anger and hate that lived in her heart, grew so fierce her brown eyes glowed like embers and she felt the fire growing inside. As she was afraid it would burn her from inside she learned to master it in a matter of minutes. Only one goal she had in mind, which was only one step away from freedom. A ball of fire shot from her eyes while she concentrated on the entrance of her parents’ stone fort. A barrel filled with grease caught fire and woke them up. They were unable to get past the fire spreading inwards. The screaming soon woke the other members up and they were just able to see how the young woman set flame to her parents. And yet her anger was not stilled; she killed every man and woman of the tribe. No soul was to be spared as the cruel tribe had to die, she decided. Hundreds of them burned that night until nothing but ashes remained as a silent reminder.

‘A pitiless tribe was destroyed who had treated her, a child, heartlessly, like she was a ragdoll, never a person, as she put it later. But even being different from them as she was, she still had belonged to them; she was the last and their blood ran in her veins, and as hard as she tried to get rid of her people they would always stay with her somehow. She ran all the way through the desert, hiding by day from the heat, walking by night in the cold to the mountains and reached strange woods. She lived among strange animals and survived against all odds. Being in another place,

which was nothing compared to her old home, helped her forget the things she was eager to forget. She was searching for a new place which she could call home; something she had never known before. And as she searched through mountains, woods and plains, she knew she searched for a feeling she never had felt, so even if she did find it she wouldn't know what it would be like.

‘She knew she did not belong to humans who only caused her pain and she knew she did not belong to other animals who avoided her because she still was surrounded by an atmosphere of wrath and hostility.

‘One day she came upon an open spot in the woods further from any place she had known, and was about to break down and was ready to die, until she found a ruined temple. She had never seen such a beautiful place before. It was spread with the most wonderful flowers she had ever seen, with the loveliest colours and shapes. She knew she had found what she had been looking for all those years, even if she had seen flowers before. This temple, its colours and its atmosphere gave her the feeling she liked and for the first time she felt at ease. Inside, its altar was covered by wet leaves and the notes of people long gone, yellow and unreadable. For hours she sat there still and numb before the god of the abandoned temple sensed a sad spirit. He appeared for her, as he had not done for years. Most people had forgotten about him in time as the knowledge of insight became less popular since it usually brought pain and suffering. This girl knew all about that already, as young as she was, and the god sensed it when he looked into her eyes. She did not ask for him like others had, but even so he had appeared for her. His dark-skinned presence, darker than hers, did not frighten her at all, since he was kind and most handsome.’

The two woman glanced at one another and smiled in conspiracy.

‘I truly am!’ He stated a little hurt, sensing their mockery before continuing.

‘She was more than charmed by not only his looks, but by the power he radiated. She knew she had met her counterpart. In the beginning she was very suspicious and it did not matter to her he was a god. That charmed him as well. She treated him like her equal. Slowly she began to trust him and look up to him, as he taught her how to master the powers inside of her.’ He stopped a moment.

‘The rest is quite personal, but I assume you have an idea now.’

‘What a dreadful history; never knowing love while growing up and to be treated like that! Artride said. ‘These tribe members sound more like beasts than people. Even animals would not treat their offspring like that. How cruel!’ Artride clearly was wrapped up in the story and felt pity for the little, unwanted unloved girl, she once had been.

‘It is indeed a sad, cruel tale. But she is not a child anymore, but a grown person still embodying the hatred she learnt to get use to; still blaming people.’

Tirsa added. ‘Could you not teach her to change that into something positive?’

‘I showed her the love that animals have for their offspring, the affection and care they share for one another, even the love people give to each other. All of my love, which was genuine, as well. She understood, or I thought she did, but it only made her remember her own shortcomings and sad history, and wrath would captivate her wounded soul again. Showing is one thing, but comprehending is another. I gave her all of my love and she did open up to me; drinking in my love she so needed and lacked all those years. She tried to make up for it. But her hatred of humans I could not cure. It is a pity I am no mortal man, perhaps then ...

Remember it was a whole tribe who spat her out and not a single soul stood up for her, protected her. This is irreversible. My motto as the god of insight is to learn from our mistakes and to grow through our misfortunes. That is how you gain insight. She, however, is so hurt; so damaged a soul I've never come across before. Mostly, one would have given in and be broken long before, but she still lived for better or for worse.

‘People are individuals and not all bad, I tried to tell her. Mostly people who do wrong are hurt themselves and victims of abuse. She began to look down on me, and my task in helping humans like I did. That is the task of all, to help each other, I explained, not only for me as a god. But she thought I pitied her and wanted to help her for my own benefit. She became more and more wrapped up in herself and in her illusions and power; she began to ignore me, not knowing how to deal with my admiration and love. It was impossible to teach her respect, for she, herself, had never had that. She had my respect, my love, my wisdom, but that was ... not enough. She wanted more ...’

‘Did she love you?’ Artride asked suddenly, and Tirsa rolled her eyes. *What does it matter?*

‘I wish I could tell you that. I wish I knew for certain. I think she is not capable of loving anyone. Not with that background, not without having received love while growing up. All the love in the world cannot save her; it is too late for that. I know that now. Her parents should have done that. I would have given my soul if I could have saved her. She still thinks she can do it all by herself.’ For a moment he was silent. ‘As for me, I should thank her really, for I was blind all that time. I had almost forgotten what it was like to gain knowledge by experience. Through pain people learn. I guess I taught her too well.’

‘Gosh, it is hard. What are we suppose to do with all this information about her, pity her?’ Tirsa asked worriedly, rubbing her neck.

‘No, she does not want your pity.’

‘Did she tell you all this herself?’ Artride asked.

‘Not with so many words. I dug in her mind mostly to find the answers. It was not a pretty place to be.’

‘If she has no spell for us and won’t make us one ...’ Artride muttered. ‘What are we to do?’

‘Take her life,’ the god answered dryly.

Artride’s mouth fell open. ‘Take her ... after everything you told about her?’

‘I made you care for her didn’t I?’ and they heard him smile. ‘That was not my intention. It will only be harder for you to take her life. No, I wanted to make you understand why she is the person she is, and why she cannot be changed.’

‘Why can’t she change? Because you failed to help her change? What makes you so proud to say that if you can’t, no one can?’

‘Artride ... if the man says the only way out of this mess is by killing her ... wait a minute ... what about the spell? If she is dead our hope of a spell dies too!’

‘I can make you one.’

‘You can? Why didn’t you say so before?’ Tirsa jumped up from the floor.

‘Then we can leave right away!’ Artride yelled exited.

‘After we kill her,’ Tirsa persistently stated.

‘We have no reason to kill her, Tirsa,’ she reminded her.

‘The Silent Folk have,’ she argued and looked in anger at the queen. How could she have forgotten about them?

‘And I do,’ Eolas said, and Tirsa sat down again, still disappointed.
‘Why you as well?’

‘Did you happen to notice talking to a book at all? I am trapped in here for as long as she lives; unfortunately she vowed to that.’

‘Oh ...’ Tirsa bit her lip. ‘Why this particular book anyway?’

‘It’s the first spell book I gave her. She has no use for it anymore, knowing everything in it by heart. I suppose it is a cruel way to thank me.’

She happened to notice Artride was turned inside herself with her own thoughts.

After a moment of stillness she said, ‘What if I try to talk to her, I mean to try and change her in a positive way, so that she lets go of her anger and thereby the Silent Folk and you are released? If she is powerful surely she can release everyone if she wanted to? I know her story now and I can at least begin to understand the why about her actions. It does not justify her deeds, but ... what if I can make her understand she does not have to live and act like she does, and that at least as a starter we will forgive her?’

‘A very noble thought, Artride, but a little naïve,’ Eolas remarked.
‘Not to mention risky. Look what happened to me and I think I have a little more power than you do.’

I hope she listens to him! Tirsa thought.

‘Therefore she might listen, as I’m no threat to her! I won’t kill her. I do not wish to kill anyone anymore!’ and she remembered the feeling she had even after she killed her uncle.

‘How are you planning to do this?’ Tirsa asked her uneasily.

‘I do not know yet.’

Tirsa could see she was serious about it, though, and she had to support her, being her minor.

‘What do you think our chances are, Eolas?’ she asked.

He sighed. ‘I wish her life could be spared too. I do not care for myself anymore. A life without her ... but you ... and the TalamhClann; even if you can reach her and talk sense into her, I doubt she truly will give something she has no desire in giving. She is not concerned about the welfare of humans. In fact, when it comes down to it, she will not prevent nor cure any violence people do to each other. And this curse only means more harm to people, which is what she wants, I suppose. The more hurt to people, the better.’

‘How do you know we seek a counter spell for a curse?’ Artride asked.

‘Because it already existed when I walked freely upon Talamh, and the only curse in Ceartas powerful and worthy enough, undertaking this venture of yours.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Think about your country, Artride and about all those people and Silent Folk, even this god who will be saved if we just take her life. One life instead of many others. I too sympathize with her. How can one not? But her history is no excuse for all her wrong doing today!’ Tirsa tried.

‘Not an excuse, but a reason,’ She silently answered. ‘All bad things have good reasons. I just believe people can change if he or she has the will and lets others help. Every grown, intelligent thinking person is responsible for their own actions and we all have a conscience. It is too simple to blame everything on your childhood, however bad it may have been. It hurts and shapes a person tremendously, but I still believe in the power to change and in the goodness of people and that no one is truly evil. It is only good out of balance. Negativity failing to be positive. I believe that Sempervirens as torn and troubled as she is, can be saved with

the right help. Perhaps Eolas was too dear, too close to her. I am not saying she will ever become an angel or a saint, but if I can just make her see what she does isn't right, then that's something. If she is as strong as you say she is, she might have the power inside of her.'

'We simply do not have enough time for all this, Artride. If we take her life she will be freed at once, and the Silent Folk and Eolas with her, and we can go home. On the Other Side they will take care of her, with love and understanding. It is not your task. Roalda wants us to do the same.'

'It is not that you do something against nature,' Eolas stated plainly. 'You will indeed release her finally and both her body and soul will know rest and peace at last.'

'Artride, the woman is a stone,' Tirsa tried.

'Yes,' Artride reflected. 'And in every stone sleeps a crystal. We just have to crack the stone to see the crystal inside.'

Artride got up and nodded at Tirsa. *I don't have to kill her for that.*

'As a queen I often have to choose the best thing for the majority instead of the individual, but remember we are all individuals who set their footprint upon the lives of others. Be that negative or positive. Once more I will do what's best for everyone. Let's go see Sempervirens.'

'What about a weapon?' Tirsa asked Eolas. 'We are both stripped from our clothes and can't conceal anything.'

'You are both naked?'

Tirsa sighed at the sudden interest in his voice.

'She wanted us to be naked, but we've found some curtains ...'

'Hmm, she must have had her reasons for that. She does nothing unless it means something, but a weapon ... I have thought about that. The best way is to take her in her sleep, it seems like a coward's way, but I see

no other option. She will know and is too powerful to fight with her magic and all. You have to gain her trust first, of course, before you can get that close to her.'

'We have so little time. Our days are running short,' Artride remarked. 'What weapon will do?'

'Any weapon. She is mortal like you, even if she believes differently, so think of something. Look around for something sharp, her heart is the weakest part, but be fast and accurate. For you will only have one shot and she must not suspect anything. She is no mind reader, so act natural. I do think Artride has the best chance. I believe you truly care for her, don't you?'

'Of course I do. I am a queen, not a mercenary.' And she glanced disdainfully at Tirsa who was shocked and hurt by her remark. Artride flushed a little, ashamed of herself, and turned away.

'There is something that will help you, but only if you are sincere.'

'What is that?' asked Artride.

'Within this room there must be an amulet. If you wear it, you cannot lie without the other knowing it. She has a very suspicious mind, but she has to believe you if you wear this. I used to wear it all the time, to make her believe I really cared for her.'

Tirsa began looking for it on the table with the other magical things. 'What does it look like?'

'It's a silver necklace with a big blue oval stone, like an enormous drop of water.'

Artride searched among the things as well, and opened a tiny wooden box where she found it. Picking the jewellery up carefully, nodding at Tirsa, she told the god she found it.

‘Alright. Use it with care and *only* when you are sure of yourself. It needs to be worn upon the heart and it will shine bright when you tell the truth and stay pale when you lie. It also can be used to ask specific questions; it will shine when the answer is yes and stay pale when it is no.’

‘What about you? Can we just leave you here?’ Artride asked quietly.

‘By all means. I shan’t go anywhere. I will know when she is gone. I shall be free again and able to help you. Good luck and please be careful.’

‘We will.’

CHAPTER 20

LAST TEMPTATION

Your soul often is a battle field on which your reason and opinion fight with your passion and lust. How I would like to be peacemaker in your soul, and change the disharmony of your elements into unity and melody. But how can I, unless you are peacemaker, and above all love your own elements?

Tanith.Lee

Stressed and worried, the women left the room empty-handed, save for the blue amulet Artride kept covered in her left hand. Sempervirens spotted them immediately and noticed they looked agitated and concerned.

The sorceress took it for what she thought it was; they had not succeeded in finding the spell. Of course she knew they wouldn't; for there was no such spell to be found. Just some old books and old gadgets she had no use for anymore.

She did not feel sorry for them, not in the least, for to her these things they talked about: saving lives and fear of losing all did not matter to her, nor did she feel pity. Of course the women intrigued her highly; for she had never seen or met more driven people than them. And they seemed highly sincere and courageous; well, she knew they were after having observed them this long. Moreover, they did not want anything for themselves and if they did, she knew now that it was a simple, carefree life they craved besides the counter spell of course. But nothing materialistic; no luxuries and wealth, and that was new to the sorceress, very new. Of course, she had her hidden agenda with them and there was time for that; lots of it. She would have them do what she craved for, for yes –

Sempervirens needed something for herself and only these two women could get it for her. Only they had the potential. True, they had not succeeded yet, but they would over time when they had stayed with her longer ...

She tried to shake the dream off; she had had just moments ago. No nightmares anymore, she took care of those; she sent them away to the dungeons where they remained dwelling, haunting the prisoners as they had Artride and Tirsa in the time they had been locked up.

This dream, however, was not new and she had been having it for years since she had begun using her spell to remain young. And this dream she had not been able to cast off: She had been standing in front of a mirror, admiring herself. Forcing a smile until her white, perfect teeth were visible. Then as always, she felt an ache in her mouth and touched one of her teeth; finding it loose. She pulled it out with one tug and she watched it with horror in her hand; amazed to see it covered with flesh and blood. More blood was seeping from the gap and she moved her tongue to fill it. Then, she could feel more teeth coming loose, and she pulled them out one by one, in horror and disgust. Feeling terribly old and unattractive, watching herself with a sudden terror in the mirror; thinking it real, until hollow gaps and smears of blood marked her once pretty mouth. Screaming from anger and frustration she clutched a rock and smashed the mirror. Crying with loud sobs and real tears she woke up and as always she would touch her teeth and check if they were still firm and holding. None of them were loose; they were strong. The spell was holding firm.

Not only did those dreams worry her; but the amount of sleep she needed lately. Even during the day she needed naps to make it through the rest of the day. She knew the spell still held when she checked herself in

the mirror; making sure by calling one of her slaves to show her how much he admired her beauty.

Observing the two women, walking the corridor on their way over to her in silence, she felt a stab of jealousy. Even with all they had encountered on their quest and the small amount of food and sleep, their bodies still looked so healthy and well-shaped. That was why she wanted to see them naked; to check what kind of changes their bodies would go through out of interest, and of course to make them feel exposed, vulnerable and uncivilized in her presence. They had lost weight, unmistakably; but it had not done anything radical to their beauty.

‘How unfair!’ she yelled.

That was why she did not have women slaves, and could only sleep with men; no matter how curious she was, and however lovely women were in her eyes; they would remind her too much of her own mortality and body-cheating spell. She needed the difference; her opposite for the balance. And the men she chose were of course non-human, but of the Silent Folk, as she could never bed a human male without being reminded of her past. They were the lowest of the low in her eyes; beasts, brutes, and would never be allowed to enter her domain; she would not even give them a chance.

Sempervirens was perfect, though and beautiful even before the spell, in fact exactly the way she looked today. But she could not bear having attractive women around her to compete with.

Looking at Artride and Tirsia, and sensing the love they felt for each other troubled her, and made her feel odd inside. It was not an unpleasant feeling, but it left an emptiness inside of her, she could not seem to fill.

They were here. She felt them coming.

The green curtain gently swept aside and the two women stepped into the room. The room had changed since they had left. It was gloomy and had lost its brightness.

Sempervirens soon altered that, and with one snap of her finger the space was filled with a pink yellow light, and the sound of a gentle breeze among leaves was to be heard, yet there where no trees to be spotted. Soon they saw where the light came from; lilies and daisies in pink and yellow along the walls and scattered on the floor, even the ceiling shone in apparently her favourite colours, for the sorceress smiled warmly and contentedly.

Even the air was filled with a sweet scent of these lovely flowers. Impressed with the scenery Artride and Tirsa came closer until they stopped in front of her.

‘I’m sorry you failed,’ she spoke with a thick sweet voice, like honey.

Artride looked with different eyes at this woman now she knew her story. But she had to pretend she didn’t know, at least not yet. ‘Perhaps you can help us a little?’

‘You just didn’t pass the last test. But not to worry; your stay here will not disappoint you. I know what you crave for deep down inside, and I can offer it to you; both of you. You will have everything you desire, right here, right now. No more roaming, no more rules, no more lies. No more pain and suffering. I offer you clarity and opportunity. Here you can be yourselves. How can you not accept? Do you not deserve this, do you not deserve to be whoever you want to be, away from the pain and difficulties of human civilization?’ Her voice was deep and enchanting, as though she was putting a spell on them whilst talking. But she did not have to, for her

words were genuine this time. She walked in circles around them like a dance, making almost no sound.

Don't let her get to you! Artride spoke to herself. I have to remember my people who will have to bow to the book, and Tirsas brother who will die, and the Silent Folk who will lose more people to her whims, and Eolas who will be trapped forever if I do not go on with this!

Sempervirens felt Artride's inner struggle and she remembered well it was she who had the most trouble to keep going, and not give in to the temptations created – although it was fairly balanced and it was she who got stronger in the end; seemingly more determined as they got closer to their goal. Although roles were reversed from time to time – when one was weak, the other was strong; they complemented each other perfectly.

'I know you better than you know yourself, Artride.' And she looked her deep in the eyes.

She cannot read my mind, she cannot read my mind!

'I believe you do,' she almost whispered. It surprised Sempervirens that she would give in without arguing, and she smiled slyly.

'But it is most sad that you forget I care not only for myself.' Artride said.

'I have not forgotten. I will simply keep reminding you that it's something not worth fighting for. Without a curse you'll have more trouble controlling your people, believe me. It is like throwing a bucket of water on a burning fire. The flames will only perish a little at the time; but the fire will not die out. It will relight when you turn your back ...' *Perhaps a little less vivid ...* Sempervirens thought in shock.

'There will still be rules and penalties, but fair. Yes, there will most likely still be crimes; people are people, but I can at least show them some goodness and guidance and with better rules in place there will be less

frustration and strife amongst people; less reason for wrong-doing. Are you saying that evil will always return?’ Artride asked.

‘The flame will seek the fire. And people are feeding it, so your bucket of goodness won’t help much. It will flatter your ego for a while before you find out nothing has changed, really. You will need an ocean. No better you will need to stay here and give up.’

‘I think I understand what you are trying to say, but listen to me. I honestly believe that the slightest thing, as small as it may be, helps. True, if I stand alone and try to change the world on my own, and everyone remains living for themselves and pays no attention to others, I have failed, perhaps. But if everyone does the same as me; lives by the kindness in their heart, treats others the way they want to be treated themselves, we can change the world together. Fire is strong yes, and especially if we keep feeding it, and one bucket of water will do little indeed, but many buckets do make a difference and a whole ocean will surely extinguish a fire; even though it will take many people and lots of effort and time. ’

Sempervirens smiled lightly at Artride, her scarlet mouth a flower and her eyes warm for a change.

‘Sadly it doesn’t work that way. I have watched people too long for that. People rather fight each other than work together.’

‘Not if they are all clear on what the mutual goal is! And it doesn’t mean we have to give up as well, and stop convincing others to do something!’ Artride said briskly.

‘You mean you can actually watch people from over here?’ asked Tirsa, trying to switch attention to her instead. Sempervirens turned to the blonde woman and nodded.

‘Impressive is it not? I can teach you.’

Tirsa's eyes grew bigger. That would be a great skill. She thought about her brother.

‘Can you see how my brother is doing?’

Her eyes flickered for just a second turning inwards, she closed them before meeting those of Tirsa with sadness.

‘I am sorry to inform you he has passed away.’

‘What?’

‘You are too late. A month has passed since you left.’

‘You lie!’ Artride had to hold her firmly around the waist from behind, for she was about to attack the sorceress.

‘There is nothing there for you now,’ Sempervirens spoke silently with curious eyes, clearly amused by the girl's reaction.

‘Is this true?’ Artride spoke. ‘How much time has passed? It cannot be a month; we have been counting of sorts. It can be no more than two weeks.’

‘I am sorry.’ But she did not mean it of course.

She is lying so Tirsa will stay. Why does she want us to remain here that badly?

Tears hindered Tirsa's view and she had to sit down on her knees. The queen calmed her and whispered in her ear that she thought she was lying. *She must be.*

‘You really want us to stay don't you? Why is that?’ she asked the staring woman.

‘I told you. I do not want more people over. I loathe them.’

‘I thought you enjoyed watching others suffer?’ Artride asked.

‘Hmm. You know me well.’ And she winked at her, knowing it would touch the queen, before walking away, her back turning to them.

‘I have been living alone for so long now.’ And she spread her arms widely. ‘And I am much used to that. I have my slaves, however, they are no challenge anymore and certainly no match for me.’

‘You had your match, but you locked him up!’ said Artride.

‘However, I could use some company and you do look like a worthy challenge to me.’ And she grinned in an attractive way.

Is she lonely? Artride thought.

‘Are we supposed to be flattered?’ Tirsa asked in anger.

‘You should, lady.’

‘So you just want our company, that’s it?’ Artride asked quickly, a hint of anger in her voice that she had to subdue greatly.

Sempervirens drew a breath like she was about to answer, but only breathed out long through her nostrils.

‘This could work, Tirsa,’ Artride whispered so that only her companion could hear and lightly touched her arm. ‘If we stay a while she might begin to trust us, and then we can hit back unexpected.’

Tirsa looked dubious. ‘I know she is lying about Elimar, it must be. And for that lie alone I could kill her,’ she hissed through gritted teeth.

Sempervirens did not hear them, but she saw them whispering in conspiracy.

‘How touching. I guess you won’t be bored during your stay here, at least you have each other.’

‘And how do we have to treat you; like a queen or a goddess perhaps?’ Tirsa asked.

‘Of course,’ she said matter-of-factly.

‘That would satisfy you, would it not?’ Artride asked while she stood up, locking onto her eyes.

‘The Silent People never hurt you, yet you still use them. Like they had to fill your void. Now finally you have two humans within your reach. You enjoyed seeing us struggle so much; watching us in pain and distress, that at last satisfied your need, did it not? That’s why you do not want us to leave. You want it to continue.’

Sempervirens’ serene face was unreadable, but she stared long at the queen in silence.

‘Alright,’ Artride concluded. ‘We shall stay, won’t we Tirsa? We’ll stay and see what you have to offer *us*.’

The sorceress narrowed her eyes in disbelief, looking suspiciously at the women to see if they were sincere. But as she raised one eyebrow, knowing it didn’t matter anyway; for they had to stay. There was not much choice there; it was either submit to her or death.

She did not fear them. She sensed the blonde woman was full of anger, pretty much like herself once; bitter and full of wrath and she knew she would try to kill her if she got the chance. The dark haired woman, however, was more of a serious threat. Her eyes, behaviour and remarks showed a perspicuous wisdom. She reminded her of someone. She somehow seemed to know her; almost like a man, a god, she was acquainted with years ago.

But he could never have passed that knowledge without them opening the book, without them knowing his name ... Even though they had been in the room where he lay entrapped within his own spell book. *His mortal name is known only to me.* So she was quite sure they did not possess her secret. The secret that could make her vulnerable and weak. Her life could be at stake then, but Sempervirens did not worry. Had she even remembered what worry felt like ...

Danger, fear and worry were feelings her heart no longer felt since she possessed the greatest power ever and made it her own. Even if she sometimes felt a slightest hint of any of those emotions, she would send them rapidly away towards her dungeons where they dwelt to hunt the prisoners.

Artride had guessed right, she did seek a higher target of her vengeance; humans, and these two women would only be the beginning, but they could not know that, yet. Soon people outside Dochas would know she would be the successor of the god of insight and many would seek her out for her aid like Artride and Tirsas had. And she would watch more people suffer by numbers in their quest to find her and crush them. If they did reach her, after many a struggle, she would perhaps let them stay and serve under her out of pure delight. The power of control, and she did not even have to leave her domain for that, they would come to her ... If they ever reached her of course, for she would make it hard on them, it was no fun otherwise. But those who did would be precious and different; worthy of staying and of receiving their prize; dwelling at the feet of their queen and Dominator of Dochas. And when the time would come, she would crush their petty civilization; she would crush their world. However, she could not do this on her own ... she would need a partner in crime; someone she had at all odds once respected and loved; no mortal, but a god ...

~ ~ ~

Tirsas knew Artride had begun her strategy and she would play along as long as it would take. 'I submit to my queen,' she therefore vehemently spoke; side glancing at Artride who she knew was watching her.

‘I have prepared a room for you. I hope it is to your liking, but we can alter it later. Now,’ and she turned and called for one of her Woodchildren slaves. One came running over immediately, slipping through the green curtain as if he had been standing there, and bowed low before her. His brown hair long and his white tunic loose around his broad shoulders. A black belt held the tunic tight at his waist and matched his black trousers and clear white boots. Artride wondered how he kept his clothes so neat and unstained; for obviously this was some sort of worker. His pale green face hung low until his queen ordered him to look at her. They saw his dark, forest green eyes, eager to look upon her, light up. He seemed to lessen his thirst just by looking at her.

‘My Lady?’

‘See to it that my guests get a proper meal in my dining room, and guide them to the bathing room afterwards.’

‘Yes, my Lady.’ And without giving them so much of a look he waited for them to follow him.

Exchanging a quick glance with one another the women followed him, hungry and tired as they were. Approvingly, Sempervirens watched them leave.

When they were ‘alone’; which of course they weren’t for her eyes and ears would be with them wherever they went around here, Tirsa tried to speak with the Woodchild, but he did not answer.

‘He is well under her spell,’ Artride remarked quietly.

He led them to a large, white marble hall with golden chandeliers which shone a warm yellow light into the room that reminded them of the sun. Tirsa’s heart ached. How long had it been since she had seen the sun and breathed in fresh air? All these illusions could not match real life. Artride guessed what she was thinking, as they sat at the long white table

covered with all kinds of food. Their stomachs growled in reply and their mouths became watery, as they licked their lips. There were many sorts of bread, rolls and loaves, many fruits such as apples, grapes, big red juicy berries and huge goblets with a sparkling golden fluid. Inhaling it, it smelled like a sweet wine. There were some cheeses too; a big round white one and a small orange with green herbs. Bowls with various nuts were spread about and a big bowl of hot vegetable soup was waiting for them.

‘This is too good to be true!’ Artride said amazed, feeling her stomach more than ever.

Tirsa tried a small piece of bread and nibbled on it. ‘It tastes like real bread to me, perhaps I should try some things out to be on the safe side.’

‘Alright. I’ll try the wine.’

‘No, wait, my Lady.’ And she put her hand on that of Artride. ‘I will.’

‘Oh, stop that ‘my Lady’ thing. It sickens me. Did you see that poor lad? It made me recall how my own servants look at me. Now I know what they must feel like, for she wants *us* to follow his example soon. I can’t believe she’ll treat us any different. We are humans after all, so it will be worse for us after her initial ‘warm’ welcome.’

‘You are right,’ said Tirsa sipping the wine carefully. ‘This might be drugged.’

‘Or poisoned and this will be our last meal.’

The women looked at one another in silence. What were they to do? They were hungry and tired, and all this good food before them could mean a test in itself.

Artride suddenly remembered the weight in her hand. The amulet could help them!

She opened her hand and quickly slipped it over her head so the cool blue gem rested on her chest. She picked up a loaf of bread and touching the pale blue drop of stone she asked softly, 'Is this food poisoned, drugged or in any other way harmful to us?'

With a hammering heart they waited, for it could attract the attention of Sempervirens and then she would start to ask them unwanted questions.

It turned pale! Artride hid the stone in her hand again, most relieved. Drawing a big gulp of breath and sighing long, Tirsa closed her eyes thankfully.

'Now, let's eat!' she almost cried out happily.

During the time they ate, they tried not to think about their worries, but enjoyed the good food, which obviously was no illusion, but real enough. Not made by magic but most likely by her 'servants'. They felt guilty, but hunger prevailed.

After they were too stuffed to speak, one of the Woodchildren came out of the blue to take and guide them further along the white corridors, ornate with splendid golden draperies and a thick deep reddish carpet, soft beneath their feet. Behind a transparent turquoise curtain, a huge warm room with a big round steaming bathtub built into the floor was shown. The Woodchild left and another stood ready for them, with soap and a scrubber at the bathtub.

The floor was made out of round turquoise green tiles with images of mermaids on them, and sea horses and fish. But they did not feel cold at their feet, but comfortably warm. As they came closer they noticed the bathtub, at the same level as the floor, it was of a shiny ocean blue plaster with bubbles beneath the surface of the water, where fresh warm water came floating in from an unknown source. The walls were of the same

colour as the floor, and a huge rainbow was painted on one of the round walls above a huge sea with stars glittering in it, so that the sea looked like a sky.

‘Amazing.’ Artride’s voice sounded hollow, like it did in her own bathroom in her castle.

‘Remember this is to impress us,’ Tirsa stated as she slipped off her veil and glided quickly into the warm welcoming water of the bathtub.

Her body relaxed immediately and she sighed with relief.

Artride joined her, for it was large enough to hold at least four people and she suddenly remembered the half naked Woodchild only covered with a blue loin cloth. She beckoned at him to give her the big round soap and the scrubber, which he did. She had an urge to pull him into the water to see what would happen; how he would respond, but she was too tired. His face showed no emotion as he lowered his eyes and turned round at her command. He would wait until they were finished and then he would give them the big white towels as ordered by his queen.

‘I’ll try to ignore him,’ Artride said, soaping herself in with the purple soap, which smelled like lavender, aware of Tirsa’s eyes on her. The luscious scent did her spirit good.

‘I thought you were used to staring eyes.’ Tirsa said.

‘Not while I am taking a bath.’

‘You do not mind I am here then?’

She gazed at Tirsa, covered with bubbles and foam from the soap up to her shoulders, her long blonde hair wet, falling over her shoulders. Drops of water lay on her long eyelashes and sprinkled her face and mouth.

‘You must have noticed that, Tirsa?’ and she smiled thinking about their shared kiss for the first time in hours. She wanted to kiss those lips

again and again, but knew she had to restrain herself. Although she yearned for Tirsa's touch and to explore her body, her mind was too occupied with other things or it should be, while the water of the bathtub seemed to soak away her worries, she would not forget, couldn't. But it was indeed very hard for both of them to resist each other, with them being so close all the time, especially naked.

After half an hour of washing and soaking, averting their eyes from each other, they decided they were clean enough and dried themselves on the fluffy white towels. Two long, white nightgowns were brought and they were glad to feel soft warm fabric on their skin again. Their feet were still bare however, but the floor was dry, warm and clean so they guessed they did not need any footwear.

Another servant led them to their separate bedrooms. At this point they were so tired they almost could not keep their eyes open, and they couldn't care less how the room looked as long as it had a bed in it.

Standing before Artride's room, after the servant had left, Tirsa asked worriedly, 'I can't let you sleep alone, can I?'

'I suppose not,' she softly remarked, holding her voice level, not trying to show any emotion or desire.

'We cannot trust her still. Wait, I'll drag my mattress to your room to watch over you. I'm a light sleeper anyway.' Tirsa said.

Artride already lay in her soft bed with purple sheets. *This is heaven*, she thought with heavy eyelids. When Tirsa came to install her own mattress next to her bed she was already dozing off. And when her bodyguard hit her own bed she was asleep. Both slept like they had not slept in days, weeks.

CHAPTER 21

SOVALIS

She who endures the most is the greatest
She who suffered the most can accomplish the most
Anyone who can control her self can control others
Tanith.Lee

Artride and Tirsa had been sleeping far too long. They should have attempted to find the bedroom of Sempervirens and tried to take her life while she was sleeping. Even though that would be easier said than done.

They both realised their mistake at breakfast, when Sempervirens showed herself smiling contentedly. She looked even more stunning, and power radiated from her like never before. The longer they stayed, the harder it would be as, they might even grow fond of her in some strange way ...

She wore a dark robe this time, and it was flapping around her gracefully like eagle wings.

Now they had to wait another day; one more day closer to death for Elimar and one day further from victory and freedom.

She is even more aware of herself now that we are here to admire her, Artride thought grimly. She thrives on admiration, as if their eyes somehow nurtured her in much the same way as her slaves were nurtured and fed by looking at her.

‘What is your plan for us?’ Tirsa asked, keeping her voice level.

‘You have a very suspicious mind, that’s good.’ And she pressed her goblet with the sparkling wine gently to her lips before taking a small sip.

‘Like you, I do not believe our intentions are so trustworthy. I have been watching you too long for that. But that is of no concern to me. You will enjoy your stay here and do not have to play a role by the time you get used to your environment.’

‘Like your slaves?’ Tirsia asked after drinking some of the sweet wine herself. She felt like a betrayer doing so, but the wine was uplifting, and she needed that.

‘My servants are very content living here.’

‘Of course; you’ve bewitched them. They don’t have a will of their own anymore.’

‘But you have.’ And she stared at Tirsia a long time.

‘But how long for?’ She placed the wine goblet back.

Sempervirens giggled pleasantly. ‘Don’t worry, I won’t use any spells on you. If I don’t have to; the more fun I’ll have.’

‘Have you no shame? Don’t you ever feel remorse?’ Tirsia tried.

‘Shame, remorse, regret, guilt ... are weaknesses of the human mind. You’ll see when you live long enough with me that those weaknesses will perish. Everyone is happy here and there is no room for anything but that. There is no need to.’

‘Alright, let me put it this way then; did they choose to come here, like us?’

She smiled slyly, caressing her wine goblet with her delicate fingers.

‘I did not have to drag them here ... It was not a hard choice for them to come along with me. They have followed me freely. Men have a weak spot for my charms. I never drugged them, so again you are wrong. Perhaps Artride understands these things better, being a queen and beautiful.’

‘Hmm. You speak of happiness,’ Artride pointed out, ignoring the latter. ‘Yet I do not feel this among your staff. True, they light up when they look at you; like they need you, like they feed on you. But not once have I seen them smile. You are the only one who does so around here. Perhaps *you* mistake things.’

A flicker of hate crossed her dark eyes now, before she answered solemnly, ‘They have no wish to leave me. You ask them and they’ll all answer the same.’ And she added, suddenly amused, ‘And trust me when I say they don’t complain when they’re alone with me.’

‘Because they’re totally obsessed with you. You have made them addicted to you, can’t you see?’ Artride said in shock, remembering Ezra.

‘But it’s a nice addiction.’

‘How can you tell? You cannot place yourself in your victims, so how can you know how they must feel?’ Tirsa angrily asked.

Sempervirens placed her goblet on the table with force. ‘You have no right to judge me, not even to speak to me that way! I must warn you once again.’

‘Very well,’ Artride continued. ‘If we are to live under the same roof perhaps we should get to know one another better; so future mistakes are avoided.’

‘As long as you remember there is only room for one queen here, and always remember what I am capable of. That is all I shall say today.’ And she stood gracefully. ‘If you will excuse me, I have some important business I have to attend to.’ And she left the dining room at a slow pace.

‘Oops, I guess we said something wrong.’

‘I do not care, Tirsa. It just doesn’t make sense, and I want to get to the bottom of this. Why does she so desperately want us to stay?’ and she shook her head so that her dark strands danced around her face.

‘So we can’t tell other people about her, I presume?’

‘No, that can’t just be it. She could kill us, easily, to avoid us going back. And it is too simple that she wants to see us suffer in here for her own entertainment; for she seems agitated because we ask too many questions. We would surely get on her nerves, but yet I feel she has some use of us, if only we could find out what that would be.’

A frown creased her forehead while she thought.

‘You are a real queen and if you serve her that will satisfy her somehow. It is like you said before – only a human bending to her would do, not a Wood or Windchild.’

‘Hmm. Still too straightforward. She does not hate us, not really. I can tell if someone does. If she was to hate us, and we would serve her, that would satisfy her I guess. No, she is intrigued by us.’

‘Perhaps she seeks a successor and she thinks we are worthy enough to be taught the things she knows? She wants to teach me how to see from a distance,’ Tirsa said with big eyes.

‘From what ...’ and Artride lowered her voice whispering, ‘Eolas told us ...’

‘From what he told us we should take her life and not reason with her anymore, or even try to understand her further. It will lead to nothing.’ Tirsa interrupted her sharply and looked suddenly severely at her. ‘And we should do it tonight!’ she whispered so only she could have heard it. ‘And he will be free to make us a spell and we can go home at last.’

Artride nodded. ‘Of course.’ And she bit her lip. Tirsa saw the hurt in her eyes and laid a warm hand upon hers.

‘Stop thinking what her intentions might be or understanding her actions before it is too late.’ It was like she was her conscious speaking.

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They spent all day strolling around the lovely garden Sempervirens made for them. It had everything a Royal Garden would have outside the cave; a neat, large grass field, flowerbeds, trees and a working fountain with a realistic statue of a dolphin. The ceiling was so high and blue: it could be mistaken for the real sky. It even had the feeling they were outside, for a summer breeze blew swiftly through the garden.

Both women still wore the white night gowns they had been given the night before. It was warm enough and certainly better than being nude. It hung loosely around their breasts, but was girdled with a small golden cord at their waist. They almost looked like members of the TalamhClann themselves with their fair skin and surpassing beauty.

Not a single glance of the sorceress was to be seen all day. It was like she was hiding from them. But patiently they waited for the night to come with beating hearts, for they worried it would not be that easy to simply kill a powerful sorceress, particularly as she most likely expected it.

Tirsa kept close to Artride in her bedroom as they waited, she had not forgotten she was her bodyguard. One could hear the other breathing, both their minds too occupied to speak.

When they thought it was late enough, for it had been some hours since they had gone to bed and they assumed Sempervirens would be asleep by now, they stood up silently. The room was faintly dimmed by an unseen source. Well aware of all watching eyes, Tirsa opened the light door without a sound. The doorknob was made of solid gold and felt oddly cold to her hand.

The corridor was dark and the lights were out. They had to make their way by intuition. Of course, they had no idea where her bedroom was, even though they had been searching the day before.

Oddly, this reminded Tirsa of that first day she was looking for Artride, who also happened to be in her bedroom when she found her. It all seemed ages ago now. She would tell her of the similarity later, if they made it out alive. She searched for one of her hands in the dark and squeezed it tight. She noticed she was trembling softly.

‘Don’t be afraid, Artride.’ She tried to reassure her.

The corridors all looked alike and were as poorly lit, but all rooms they entered seemed to be on the same level – the kitchen, the dining room, the bathroom, the garden, which even had a fake moon casting its light on the trees and plants. But of course it would be, if it was in fact a cave.

Her bedroom was very far off, anyhow, near the bedrooms of her slaves who were all fast asleep. It was as though she wanted to be found; for her door stood slightly open. Lightly dimmed as their own room was, they could make out her bed.

There she was; her face serene, her dark features as pure and breathtaking even asleep. Her eyelids with their long lashes closed, she looked so innocent. Artride thought about her history and that she once had been a lonely innocent child; hurt, battered, craving love and attention like any toddler and that now, years later, she got that attention in a wrong way because she did not know how to get it any other way. She was too ruined for that. Even Eolas couldn’t heal her.

When Tirsa entered first and got nearer she noticed Sempervirens was not alone. A fair-haired lad with the whitest skin she’d ever seen lay next to her with his arm draped loosely around her waist. First she thought he was a dead Woodchild and this was some cruel trick of hers, but then she saw his shallow breathing and realised it was a Windchild and he was alive.

How can he survive in here? She remembered the Windchild in the cloud had mentioned abductions of Windchildren as well, but until now they had seen no evidence of them. Tirsa would have thought they would die in this cave, without the wind they needed for their survival. How was this possible? Her spell on him must be great, however wicked, to keep him captured and alive in here. Her blood boiled in anger and silently she gripped one of the many pillows. Artride's blue eyes were wide and showed fear, but she nodded at her when she glanced for approval.

Tirsa held the pillow above the face of the sorceress and reassured herself that her death would serve a greater purpose, side-glancing at the pale, sleeping lad before pressing it down. *For you.*

They heard a soft sigh underneath the pillow, so Tirsa pushed harder with effort.

'How you disappoint me!' they heard her say as she easily shoved the pillow aside. She pushed back with all her strength, but the pillow remained hanging above the woman's face!

Easily she shoved it completely aside and Tirsa had to let go, before noticing Artride had a worried expression on her pale face.

Shaking her head, she made a clicking sound with her tongue. 'And I'm thinking by now they would be all over each other, instead of me! What a pity, all that precious time wasted.' And she rose up; not ashamed of her beautiful naked body, waking the Windchild with her movement. His eyes grew big when he saw the audience and stared at his queen. Dressing herself in a lovely auburn-ebony nightgown, she showed him the door. He grabbed a white sheet, wrapping it around his waist before running off.

She laughed at the women who were confused, but alert.

‘Instead of having some fun, like me, you try to ... what ... take my life?’ and she laughed loudly. The women glanced at each other, holding their silence.

‘What good would that do? You can say goodbye to your spell if I’m dead, not that you would succeed of course. But ...’ and she raised an arched eyebrow, smiling, pleased.

‘I will forgive you for this, for I am in a good mood. Besides, you are no threat to me. In fact, I like you even better now that you try not to win me over to that good side of yours anymore, but show yourselves to be just as bad. You are dismissed.’ And she waved them away; still standing aside her bed she turned her back to them.

Side glancing at one another they both knew what had to be done. Tirsa nodded at Artride who pressed her lips together nervously.

She walked over to Sempervirens, who heard her footsteps from behind.

‘Have you not heard me, woman?’

‘I have. I just want to say I am grateful you do not punish us.’

Sempervirens turned slowly to face Artride, for she knew the word punish all too well and she had not heard it in decades ...

Her face was a little milder, it seemed.

‘You have found my bedroom, as you have found my home. How can I punish a determined, clever person?’ she said in a serene voice.

You see? She is already changing by our mere presence! Artride thought.

‘Then you understand we have come here for you. Deep down inside, you know this to be true. You want to be saved.’

Sempervirens face screwed up a little before she smiled, but it was a wicked smile.

‘Save me by killing me, hmm?’ she said ironically and she made a hissing sound and smiled. ‘Wouldn’t I just have invited you over?’

‘You did by letting us stay,’ Artride said in a steady voice.

‘Well, you can believe what you want to believe, I won’t stop you. People tend to explain everything that happens to them in life; over analysing, how tiresome. Tss, saving me!’

‘Well, I just believe that things do not happen for nothing,’ Artride quickly responded.

Sempervirens narrowed her eyes somewhat. ‘I knew you were different and I’m not all as displeased as I sound. I will be honest with you; now that you have been honest with me.’

And she looked straight through them when she said, ‘I want to meet more people like you if they exist. I want them to come to me.’

‘Why?’ Tirsa asked stepping forward with curious eyes.

‘Well, not to save me!’ And she laughed at her own joke. ‘For my ... ultimate revenge. The human race has not been ... kind to me. But that does not matter anymore for their time is over. My time, however, is at hand, in which I and I alone shall rule.’

‘So you do want more people over to ... serve you?’ Tirsa asked.

She smiled. ‘Only those who succeed can join me, the rest, which will be the majority, will fail and I will watch them stumble and fall with pleasure.’ Her eyes glittered with joy.

‘I should have known.’ Artride sighed disappointed, nodding her head.

‘Why would they even bother to come over here?’ Tirsa asked raising her hands.

‘Why did *you* come here?’ Sempervirens reminded her.

Tirsa rolled her eyes. ‘What makes you so sure other people will? We had no other option; there are very few advanced sorcerers. But most people will find it too risky to even try to travel through the Magical Land.’

‘I will make sure they will come. I will lessen the dangers and I will send messengers, spreading word about a hidden treasure within this cave and the most powerful person in the world to grant them any wish. Greed and curiosity will make them come.’

‘What good would that do? Why bother?’ Artride asked suddenly, trying her new approach.

‘Why talk about revenge?’ she sounded kind, stepping closer. ‘Can you not see you avenge yourself by simply hiding from the world? Watching people suffer, you are reminded of your own hurt. All you do, living all this time in here, is to avenge yourself really. Justice I believe in, but vengeance after all these years – after all these lives lost and everything gained: power, knowledge, wealth, what have you really learned? Do you think I have not lived with hate in my heart for the sorcerer who caused my people and me so much grief? But he is long dead now and I cannot kill him anymore; nor would it do any good to take it out on other people. I must deal with the consequences of his actions today. And I have learned to avenge my father and all those who have died because of this dangerous curse with love; love for my country, my people, my freedom and love for life itself. Hate only lets itself be beaten with love. A soldier like Tirsa fights with love in her heart too, not with hate. Let go of your hate that eats you up inside like a parasite. Be a soldier of peace. Fight your own hate with love.’ And she made a fist to empower her words and placed it over her heart.

Sempervirens stared plainly at Artride as she seemed to weigh up her words. Then her eyes seemed to glow as she said, ‘Was it your love that made you kill your father’s brother?’

Artride reddened and her mouth trembled slightly at the thought. But then she seemed to strengthen herself again and she spoke with a steady voice, ‘Yes, were it not for the love of my country and its people I wouldn’t have killed. I would not even be here. For this and my love for life I will do almost anything.’

‘Even take a life, your uncle and mine ... Then we are not so very unlike, you and I.’

‘No ... *you* seem to be able to enjoy hurting people; torturing them, preventing them from a life of freedom, forcing your will upon them. That itself gives you power; that makes you feel good about yourself. I, however, detest this. I could never live with myself knowing I hurt other people intentionally.’

‘Perhaps you’ve never known true cruelty like I have.’ And Sempervirens seemed to shudder.

‘Most likely not. However, no one can ever undo the hurt caused to you by people long gone. No matter how many souls you capture; no matter how many you torment, no matter how many innocent lives you take. It won’t heal you; you’ll never get yourself back doing this. You are more human than you will admit, Sempervirens. You talked about turning away from the pain the human world causes; that’s a start. But you yourself still live *with* pain. You brought it with you. You cannot seem to leave it behind.’

She sighed heavily, wanting to close her ears, getting restless.

‘Not only do you punish other creatures now for your revenge, whereby you think luring and testing human beings is the most thrilling of

all. You are still punishing yourself at the same time, even if you live in luxury and pretty illusions; you're still utterly alone and lonely, with no one who truly loves you. You even had to cast a spell on your poor TalamhClann servants to like you.'

Sempervirens's eyes had grown bigger and redder while the queen had talked and a frown showed on her forehead. How did she know so much about her? It was like she was reading her so clearly ... It angered her, soothed and confused her at the same time. Had she, after all, found the book with Eolas trapped and ... spoken to him?

'Do not try to analyse me, Artride!' she said out loudly, and stood her ground with narrowing, dangerous eyes.

'I do not have to. I know ... we know ... the truth about you.'

She saw Sempervirens swallow more nervously than she expected, replying quickly,

'What do you mean?' and she flickered her eyes nervously as they had not seen her do before. She was losing her control.

Artride pulled the amulet from underneath her night gown and showed it to her.

The eyes of the sorceress showed humour. It made sense to her now. The amulet of Honesty and Truth.

'So, you found one of my pieces of jewellery?' and she rose her shoulders lightly and sighed, relieved.

'Yes, but we know what it can do.'

'Alright, you found that out; I told you I thought you most clever. You are indeed worthy.'

'Yes, but you have underestimated us. We are more than clever. We have met your friend ... Eolas.'

Her whole body seemed to freeze in hearing his name, and for a moment she could not speak. Then her almond shaped, dark eyes grew wide and she showed fear and fury at the same time.

‘That cannot be!’ she spat.

‘Don’t be alarmed. We only want to help you.’ And she pulled the amulet over her head.

‘Look, and now you’ll believe all I’ll tell you to be true.’

‘You will not lecture me anymore!’ and an invisible hand grabbed the necklace from her neck, pulled so that the cord broke and threw it away. The women saw it hitting the wall before it fell with a sharp sound to the floor ... in tiny pieces ... broken.

‘You will leave my room at once if you want to live to see the day!’

Artride swallowed away her fear and licked her lips before she replied, ‘I guess we won’t ever be seeing daylight again, if it’s up to you, will we?’

‘Not if I can help it, now be gone!’

The women turned to the door as if to leave, but as Tirsa left, Artride froze before turning. *If not now, when?*

‘No, I will not leave.’

Sempervirens’ eyes grew narrow and her mouth twisted in scorn. Someone had disobeyed her and they would pay the price.

‘You dare to disobey *me*?’ her voice was loud and echoed through the room and beyond.

‘Please, listen to me,’ Artride stepped back towards her.

‘I will not let you corrupt my mind any longer. I have tolerated it too long!’

Tirsa quickly grabbed Artride’s arm and pulled at her. ‘Come on.’

‘Yes, listen to your guardian angel, Artride,’ she ironically said, and laughed wickedly.

‘No, Tirsa, we shall have it my way now.’ And as they walked away she shook her arm loose.

‘Your way did not work, nor will it ever, can’t you see?’

Sempervirens laughed madly and it filled her bedroom. It would have shrunk them if they weren’t too angry for that.

‘Stop it! Stop your juvenile behaviour and listen to me!’ Artride screamed going back.

She stopped laughing alright, but her expression was not to be fooled with. The sorceress was furious and fire was building up inside of her. Her dark eyes grew scarlet.

‘I am sorry to speak to you like this; but only harsh words seem to work with you. Somehow you seem to respect that more than kindness. I only want to understand you and make you see that you have to stop hating! You have watched us all this time.’ And she looked at Tirsa. ‘And watched our friendship grow and our love for one another, haven’t you? But you make it look like something sick, while it is pure and real! Can’t you see, did you not learn anything? You have been playing with us and tried to destroy everything we have; yet you failed, because love is stronger than hate, stronger than you!’

‘Is it?’ and Artride felt herself being lifted up and up, and being thrown with force through the doorway against the wall of the corridor.

With a smack and a thud she fell to the floor. Tirsa ran to see to her and fell down on her knees beside her. Gasping for air, the queen lay on her back and stared at Sempervirens in horror. She could not see her eyes, but was sure she saw a flicker of concern washing over her face.

‘Nothing is more powerful than me!’ her voice thundered before the door slammed shut with a loud bang.

Tirsa stood up after she had made sure Artride was alright, kicking the door open with her legs before Sempervirens could lock it and walking straight to the Queen of Dochas.

‘Have you no shame? She’s never thought badly of you; even after all you’ve done! And now she knows your history, all she wants to do is help you. She even tends to forget her own worries and our own task, and you treat her like this?’

‘Aaaaah, she is so selfless she was not even tempted to stay once in Dochas?’

Tirsa’s eyes softened and she drew a deep breath. ‘The life of a queen is not always easy, and in order to be of use to others you sometimes have to treat yourself right and stay truthful to yourself. It is a spiritual need. She is however the most selfless person I have ever come across.’

Sempervirens smiled, her arms crossed over her breasts. ‘How touching. Tell her again I do not want her help. I will not give her the credit. Now did I not tell you to leave?’

‘Or what, you’ll smash me into a wall too? The same as you lock up the people who love you? Or smash them against a wall or even kill them if they’re mortal or disobey you? How convenient; not to deal with love anymore. Just throw it away!’ and Tirsa made a wide gesture with her arms.

‘Love!’ Sempervirens spoke the word while she spat it out. ‘Love is not as ideal and perfect as one thinks. Do not be so naïve! Love means hurt!’ and she pointed a finger at Tirsa who backed away as she expected a blow of some sort, but nothing came.

Artride stood up, regaining her composure and softly said, ‘And you do not want to be hurt anymore, we know that. And we sympathise with you, really.’ Artride coughed, while a small stream of blood ran along her mouth.

‘You’re bleeding!’

Artride run a hand across her mouth and wiped it away carelessly, ignoring Tirsa.

‘I don’t care.’ Artride came closer to the sorceress whose eyes grew bigger. Sempervirens had to admit this woman had courage and perseverance.

‘You cannot live without love, without friendship. Can you not at least begin to love yourself?’

‘I do love myself, greatly.’

‘You don’t really. You love what you have become. You must love *all* of you ... call this little girl inside of you and love *her*. She needs you. Do not hide her. Love her like no one did and you can truly love the grown woman you have become.’

They saw her licking her lips in doubt. Was she to turn away these women before it was too late? Call the child inside of her; what child? She was long dead, killed at a young age, not broken, but turned into stone.

‘There is no little girl. Not anymore ...’

Artride came even closer and could almost touch her. Sempervirens automatically stepped back when she felt her warmth.

‘She’s not gone because she is a part of you. She still is and will always be. Can you not hear her?’

‘Oh stop the nonsense!’

‘She just wants to be heard and loved!’ Artride stubbornly reflected, not letting go.

She dropped her head and whispered, 'Did you not love Eolas? And did he not love you?'

'It intervened with my work!' she said through gritted teeth, trying not to let memories slip through.

'That may be so, but did it not feel good while you had it? To have someone who cared for you, wanted you, needed you, respected, trusted and loved you for the person you are?'

'Like I said, love is a burden; nothing but trouble.'

'To love someone is easy, but to keep it is a risk, yes and painful sometimes because we are vulnerable in our love; afraid to loose, to be hurt. But even if relationships are an effort and we will get hurt from time to time, it is a risk worth taking. Life means both pain and joy and it's not separable. You have experienced both; but you like pain better don't you? It's easier to hate than to love.'

Sempervirens uncontrollably thought back to her early days and her life in fear and agony. She had seen the same emotions in the eyes of her servants and even in these two women during their way of getting here. So vulnerable and sad. How could she have let it come so far? A moment of clarity followed; what was she doing? Her fear had turned into hatred long ago and she could not let go anymore. Even Eolas failed in saving her. She was appalled by the idea that someone looked through her and saw her as a small helpless hurt child, for she wasn't. And she had also hated Eolas for that and for wanting to change her. And now this queen had the same intentions ... Could they not see she did not need them? She was not a frail, weak child. And they were doing it for themselves anyway. Couldn't they just leave her alone?

'Everyone needs love, even you, Sempervirens,' Artride continued with her hands spread out. 'I believe the will is there, although it may

seem you have turned your back on humanity. You possess the wisdom to understand by observing people in their struggles. You have learned a great deal from the relations between people, and thus yourself. Through relations you truly learn and even you comprehend this. Therefore, I also believe you have the ability to change for the better.'

'Hmm, and you think you can do that to me? My, you must think *yourself* a mighty sorceress then!'

'No, you alone can do that with some help. You yourself hold the key. So, you think it impossible then?'

'That word does not exist to me. But you are very mistaken if you think I'll ever love again, for I won't.'

'Not even yourself?'

'Oh stop it!' and she turned, avoiding the immense deep blue eyes of Artride.

Sempervirens always confused love with pain, and she never wanted to feel that again, so she would never let love captivate her heart again.

Suddenly she turned to Artride and smiled lightly. 'Perhaps ... I should thank you for your concern. Yet I do not want your pity. You can use that on yourself. We are very much alike, Artride, you and I, if you like it or not. Both have no one left who loves us for who we truly are, not what we appear to be.'

'Then you have not seen how much I care for her,' Tirsia interrupted.

Artride stared at Tirsia who blushed slightly when she returned her look.

'Well, isn't that sweet, but how long will it last? A decade, twenty, thirty years before you realise your bodies will begin to work against you

and fail you? Or better; if you are tired of one another?’

‘You talk about getting older and physical attraction?’ Artride said. ‘What has that got to do with true love? Love does not age and does not judge; nor will it ever die if love is true and deep. Romantic love and passion is two souls wanting to emerge as one; beyond the boundary of a body eventually. Love grows and only deepens over the years. You talk about physical attraction; that’s not love alone, lust is only a part of that. Eolas was immortal, he would not age if that was a problem for you–’

‘He wanted to possess me, control me, own me ... no one will ever own me!’

‘He loved you with all his heart!’

She narrowed her eyes. ‘If you think you can seduce me, you’re wrong. I am not attracted to women.’

Artride sighed. ‘I want to help you, not sleep with you. Like you said, I do understand how it feels to be adored for what I am, not *who* I am. Well, I know you now and still love you.’

Those words drummed in her head. *Love you ... love you ... love you ...*

‘Love me?’ Her words sounded dubious and suspicious.

Artride slowly approached her and gently picked up one loose hand and held it in her own. Sempervirens looked alarmed, but let her, knowing she was too strong for her to really be a match for her. But still she suddenly looked a little vulnerable, looking at their entangled hands and felt warmth beginning to glow around her heart. *No, it cannot be ...*

‘I love the girl you once were and the woman you were supposed to be. Not what *they* made you to be. I do not believe this is you at all. You were not responsible for the girl, but the woman you are today you can

still change, if you just let go of that dark, negative side of yours. Then you can love yourself ... finally.'

Sempervirens was speechless for a moment and just stared at her, while Artride wouldn't let go.

'You have suffered so much and a big part of you knows you deserve better. You have tried. You have surrounded yourself with beauty and riches and it is all yours. You even have people serving your every desire. All you lack is the most important thing in life; unconditional love. Instead you cause harm to others, giving them pain and distress, and you took away the most important thing: their freedom. Because that is all you ever knew. It happened to you. Can you not see you have become what you hated most?'

Her eyes grew bigger before they narrowed again. For the first time the sorceress was ... speechless.

'You must have felt so powerless; perhaps a bit like I feel every day back in Ceartas. But you have grown so strong despite everything you suffered. You've built your power with hate into the sorceress you are today. The question is, do you want to continue living with hate in your heart or will you start to admit they did you wrong, but that those people are long gone and you cannot continue this into eternity?'

'Oh, but I can, my dear, for I have all the time in the world.'

Artride looked worried and solemn.

'Is it that hard to let go?'

'Says spoilt brat number one!' and she let go of her hand, moving away.

Artride's mouth twisted. 'I admit I am spoilt. I knew all the love one can get, that's why I have enough to share with you!'

'Share with me! Just hear yourself. Give me a break!'

‘We are not your enemy!’ said Tirsa and stepped forward, next to Artride. ‘Nor are you our enemy. I see that now. Your enemy is the whole world.’

‘You’re more human than you will admit,’ Artride interrupted, not wanting to let go of the mind of the sorceress. ‘You have a human heart; you just have to learn how to use it. Let me help you. Your enemy is indeed the whole world, but I go one step further. I say your true enemy is you, Sempervirens. Your wrongdoers have paid a long time ago; but you punish yourself every single day and with that hundreds of others. But if you do not care for them; I know you care for that little girl inside you. She is all alone. She is innocent. Even *you* have forsaken her. You let the crimes continue, the pain and the suffering. She watches too, you know, over your shoulder. She hates it, doesn’t she? All she wants is to play and to have fun, no more bad dreams and worry for what is to come.’

‘But I must! My revenge will be complete if I can control the human race, let them crawl under my feet!’

‘No it won’t. More suffering and pain will follow. You can end it, here, now, today! You won’t be alone.’ And she paused to allow the weight of her words to have their effect. ‘I am her to stay and help you.’

Tirsa’s mouth opened in shock, Sempervirens noticed and her eyes turned watery and Artride’s heart jumped. She was really getting to her. It was only a matter of time now ...

Artride knew she really had no time to actually help her if she was to save Elimar in time, but Sempervirens knew that as well and found it remarkable even so that she would use her precious time on her right now, while she could be saving her own country. But how, she needed her for that, so a part of her was still suspicious and thought she did all this for

herself. To make her weak and beg for a spell. They wouldn't kill her in her weakest moment when one could; they needed her too much.

However, Artride had not made a deliberate choice; she genuinely tried to save Sempervirens' soul. And besides she hoped, if the sorceress would give in she might even decide to release Eolas and give them the spell they required in return. But in the back of her head she knew that was just a heart's desire.

'It will be a long way, but at least you are not alone,' she repeated honestly, because that seemed to work. That touched her heart truly for it sounded so sincere. One single tear appeared in the corner of Sempervirens' eye and slowly ran along her olive skinned cheek. With one hand she touched her face, feeling her wet cheek. She blinked her eyes, not used to the salty liquid stinging her eyes. Artride responded instinctively and enclosed her arms around the same woman they had just tried to kill moments ago. Sempervirens let her, while she softly shuddered.

Tirsa watched the scene with an open mouth; simply amazed by what she saw. Tears came to her own eyes while a broad smile painted her face. A warm proud smile.

Sempervirens lifted her head for a moment and saw the blonde woman smiling. She took the smile differently with her suspicious mind, and all of a sudden she stopped trusting Artride, thinking that this could be a trick to melt her stone cold heart and kill her after all. She was very human at this moment; she even felt her illusion weakening. But they could not know this weak spot of hers, not even Eolas did. Or perhaps they thought they could escape this way, that she would let them. And they had mentioned Eolas, even though in her heart she needed him; she would never admit to anyone, including him, she needed him, loved him more than she loved herself and could not deal with it. She, however, had hoped

the two women would find him and over time would bring the book to her and she would release him when no one was looking. But now her plan was falling to pieces! Quickly she grabbed Artride by her throat and squeezed hard.

‘I believed you ... almost! But you are just like the rest, you lied to me!’ she screamed at her, with her face still wet from tears.

Artride shook her head, not able to speak, while Tirsa protested, understanding her mistake.

‘No, no. You have it wrong.’

She ignored her and slapped Artride with her free hand. A hard blow burning her face. It felt like hitting a child; all wrong, but quickly she regained her composure as Artride hit the ground. She looked at Tirsa who jumped to catch her, and flew an invisible hand at her to prevent her. Falling back in the hallway, she broke her own fall with her hands and immediately rolled backwards before standing up again. She surprised the sorceress with that, but she turned the invisible hand at her again and held her firm in her hold.

‘Artride?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Please let me see if she is alright.’

Sempervirens grasped Artride by her hair and lifted her head. Her eyes were closed and at the corner of her mouth fresh blood run. She shook her head. ‘Oh-oh, she’s not alright.’

‘Oh, gods, she did not deserve that, not after all she said to help you!’ Tirsa exclaimed.

‘To help herself, more likely! She betrayed me, but that is hardly surprising.’

‘You could have asked the blue amulet to see she has not been lying to you! Or surely you know other spells to do so?’

Sempervirens stared at the helpless woman hanging slightly above the floor with her arms firmly pinned to her waist. ‘I am done with the truth and I don’t need any more proof of your doings!’ Sempervirens said.

‘You fear the truth?’

‘I have been listening too long to the both of you. Now it’s my turn!’ she yelled and threw Tirsa with enormous speed across the hallway at one of the far walls. She stretched her arms to lessen the impact, but yet the impact of the blow was fierce. When she hit the floor she collapsed immediately.

Sempervirens laughed and cried at the same time, madly; throwing her head backwards, coming into her direction.

Just a few breaths later Tirsa moved her painful legs and checked her hands, which were bruised and bloody. Her shoulders ached extremely too; but even so she tried to stand.

‘Oh dear, did you hurt yourself?’ She heard Sempervirens say viciously and when she looked up she saw her standing firm, looking disdainfully down at her. She waited a few moments, trying to look beaten, but then she reached out quickly, grabbing her ankle, yanking her to the ground. She would have fallen if her invisible hand had not caught her. Gracefully she sat on the hand and crossed her legs alluringly. Tirsa lay on the floor, when they heard a soft moan from the other end. It was Artride.

‘What did you say, my dear?’ the sorceress sarcastically sniggered. ‘Are you hurt?’

Tirsa felt anger rising up inside of her. *How can she? She has not changed a bit! She’ll never!*

Sempervirens flew on the invisible hand through the large hallway over to Artride who was rubbing her painful head.

‘Have a headache, dear?’

‘Semper ... virens, you have to believe me.’ Her voice was small and showed hurt.

‘Oh be quiet. Do you want me to strike you again?’

‘No, don’t!’ they heard Tirsa scream and she came running towards the sorceress.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’ and she raised one hand and a ball of fire flaming from her eyes hit Tirsa in her stomach. The power of the ball threw her backwards. Her nightgown was on fire and she tried to extinguish it with her hands.

‘Well, this could get amusing after all!’

Artride rose and even though she felt as if she had been kicked by a horse she begged her to stop, standing in front of her strongly.

‘I am on to you, ladies. I must admit that it was cleverly done. So you had a plan A and a plan B? Hmm, very cunning.’ And she stepped off the hand, walking away towards her big bedroom.

‘A shame really, you had such potential. However, I cannot possible live together with people like you. There remain two choices; locked up in my dungeons or ... death. It’s up to you.’ And she laughed wickedly.

Artride walked over to Tirsa who was recovering from the fireball.

‘Separately of course.’

She heard them whispering, and shouted at them before being about to close her door,

‘That is not very polite in public!’

They walked slowly over to her, showing no fear, which surprised Sempervirens.

‘We are not impressed by your magic, Sempervirens. You can change the floor into ceiling and fire into water for all I care.’ Artride spoke softly, clearly in pain. ‘I would be impressed, however, and that would be a true miracle if ... you could release one negative emotion and change it into something positive.’

The face of the sorceress was unreadable again, but her eyes did flicker once.

She walked away towards her bed, concealing her face.

Artride followed her and Tirsa tried to stop her; warning her, but failed.

When Sempervirens realised Artride was walking in her footsteps, she pushed her back with the invisible hand, without glancing back.

Tirsa broke Artride’s fall. Angrily Artride yelled, ‘You can push me or hit me every time I get close to you, but you know I am right!’

‘It is not a matter of right or wrong, Artride,’ she sounded in a softer voice, her face lowered.

‘It is a matter of pride.’ And the sorceress turned round facing them again. When she did she stared into Artride’s deep blue eyes and right into the glittering blade of a tiny dagger. She did not flinch, but smiled instead. ‘Oh, Artride you scare me so!’ she joked.

Tirsa came to stand behind her. She had been very quick in picking the knife up, so rapidly she had not noticed the queen doing so. She must have seen it lying beside the bed. Tirsa wondered why it had been there in the first place. Perhaps she used it during her cruel ‘lovemaking’ to one of her servants.

Both women could see how the hand of Artride shook while she pointed the knife in front of the sorceress' chest.

'Why, you cannot hurt me! You ... love me!' and she laughed aloud.

When Sempervirens stopped laughing, she snapped, 'Weapons cannot hurt me. I am immortal. Eolas must have told you?'

'Yes he did. Stop fighting it, let go of your hatred. We have come so far. Once you have overcome your fear you will be truly powerful.'

'Why Artride? What does it matter to you now? So you can feel power over me? Power you never had? Or perhaps it is your compassion for my slaves? For surely you do not need me. Eolas no doubt promised to create you the counter spell once he is free, when I die.'

'He and all the rest can only be free when you are, but that does not have to be in death. There is a different way.' Artride said.

A stream of blood run from Artride's nose, she felt it but did not wipe it away, and her lip and cheek was swollen. Sempervirens saw it and again felt something. She felt it in her heart. She didn't like it. She wanted to step into her bed and hide under the sheets and sleep. She felt so tired suddenly and didn't want to fight anymore.

'I know you can do it. I still believe in you,' Artride honestly spoke and lowered the knife.

She raised one eyebrow questionably and started laughing madly. That was the only way to deal with it all; laugh and cry at the same time. So many new emotions rushed through her body she did not recognise, but Tirsa saw it the wrong way. She knew these sort of people could be unpredictable, and made her own move. Sempervirens did not expect it any more than Artride did.

She quickly pushed her queen in the back and with that the blade fell into the exposed chest of the sorceress. They could both feel it slide in and touch the ribs at the side of the blade.

Sempervirens barely made a sound and stared unbelievably at her own chest; feeling an enormous sense of pain exploding in her chest, weakening her.

‘Impossible!’ she gasped. Artride quickly let go of the knife as if it was burning her and turned around to face Tirsia, with a horrified expression and open mouth.

Tirsia put her arms around Artride, but she pulled away with a disgusted look.

‘How could you? I was so close...’

Sempervirens still stared at the blade stuck in her chest, trying to figure out how it was possible it had touched and ... cut through her heart. She couldn’t have been that weak? Had her stone heart been softened by those woman’s words? How could that have happened, it was a magic spell, how could Artride have broken her magic, thawed her stone heart?

She was dying. She felt the life flowing out of her along with the red blood gushing from her chest, darkening the nightgown, dripping down her stomach and legs to the floor. Her legs felt feeble and she dropped down to her knees. The queen dropped in front of her, with one hand at her open mouth, tears swelling up in her eyes. Sempervirens stared at her, still amazed. ‘How?’

‘You did let go ... I guess ... you were vulnerable.’

‘I ... should have known ... with your ... you ... really could.’ And Sempervirens grabbed her by the shoulders in awe. She gasped, and Artride swallowed hard while she reached to support her head from falling back. Sempervirens brown eyes still sparkled so bright, so alive, orange

specks like sunshine appeared in her eyes. Blood ran from her mouth. She tried to swallow it back and coughed up more.

‘I ... know ... you meant well ... now. I never would have ... bel ...’

‘Is there something we can do? I mean, you’re powerful and this is the magical land! Roalda; could she help?’ Artride asked.

Sempervirens smiled; an honest smile, tears running down her cheeks. She stared up at Tirsa who had kneeled beside Artride, looking guiltily on ‘Never ... forget ... how lucky ... you both are.’

She reached out and took hold of one of Artride’s hands and squeezed it slightly. It was amazing how long she could live with the blade stuck in her ever-beating, dying heart; but it wasn’t surprising for a powerful sorceress as she was. Her voice had altered and was a mere hoarse whisper now, so she had to lean close to hear her last words, ‘My ... real name’s ... Sovalis.’

‘Sovalis,’ Artride repeated. ‘A beautiful name.’

‘I can see ... clearly now ... thanks to...you. Thank you. For ... give me ... so that ... my soul ... may rest.’

Artride swallowed hard and nodded, tears streaming down her face, ‘I forgive you. I hope you will find rest in the afterlife.’

Saying that Sempervirens/Sovalis’ head sunk in Artride’s hand, with tear-stung open eyes. A soft yellow light emerged from the body, rising to the ceiling. They both saw it.

Tirsa pictured in her mind a small child smiling down at her. The child Sovalis took one of the hands of adult Sempervirens and together they walked away into that yellow comforting tunnel of light.

Looking down at the body of the sorceress she knew she was no longer there. She had her rest, finally after more than three centuries. A

deadly silence came over the place and over the two women. Something hung in the air.

CHAPTER 22

HOPE PREVAILS

*We are only human and make mistakes
Though some of us can see further than others.
But no one is perfect. Perfectible, maybe, in the fullness of time. Not
perfect.*

M.Z. Bradley

The lifeless body of the sorceress in front of them changed before their eyes. First the soft tanned skin got thinner and greener then grey and looser around the bones. Her face showed visible wrinkles around the eyes and cheeks, and her black chin length hair suddenly started growing and colouring white. Sempervirens/ Sovalis finally aged for the first time and she was a beautiful old woman.

Both women stared with wonder and horror when it did not stop there. She shrunk a little more and her teeth turned yellow and fell out of her thinner mouth. Slowly she began to decay; the greyed skin crumbled until the brownish bone was to be seen and the dark red, dried organs; all fell apart and sunk to the floor until nothing was left of her but dust.

Artride had lowered her head, covering her eyes, sickened by what she saw, but Tirsa was amazed.

They stared at the pile of grey dust.

‘Farewell,’ Tirsa whispered. *You have been dead ever since you came here. Ever since you turned your back on everything and everyone, even the world.* And she realised by killing her she had killed that part in herself as well; the selfish, self-indulgent part, wrapped up in her own

grief away from the world, inside her own little world. Now she too, could start to change for the better.

Artride used the back of her hand to wipe a tear away.

‘All is well now,’ Tirsa concluded and she placed a warm hand on her back. ‘As it should be.’ She had saved her, truly and let her pass on. Artride was a hero.

‘Then why do I feel so bad about it?’

‘Because I forced you to push the knife in and together we took a life. It was perfect timing; there was no other way. But she was grateful, couldn’t you tell?’

Artride nodded. ‘I suppose, but I just mourn for the loss. For her life that was wasted with hate and foul games.’

‘At least she died turning away from evil, with love touching her very heart and soul.’ They heard a familiar voice speak behind them.

Turning around they spotted a tall dark-skinned man clothed in a black long robe. He had not lied; he was beautiful, truly a god. A smile lay upon his full lips in his bronze face while his pit-black ancient eyes glittered like stars. His hair was short and close cropped to his skull.

‘Eolas?’ Tirsa asked, open mouthed.

He bowed lightly. ‘Back in the land of the living, thanks to you two.’

Both women smiled at him.

‘Gods, you two are attractive, did it not make her jealous?’ he said walking towards them.

Artride stood up and bowed her head lightly. ‘Artride Cumhachd of Ceartas, pleased to meet you.’

‘And Tirsa Lathabris.’

He took their hands warmly. His hands felt very real, very mortal.

‘Good to see the faces that match those pretty voices. And I will try to look at just your faces,’ he said with humour.

His glance shifted to the pile of dust on the floor and his joyous mood changed. He kneeled at the dust and wiped a finger in it; feeling the dust crunch between his fingers, whispering soft words in the ancient tongue.

When he rose again he nodded at them, but especially at Artride.

‘I’m most proud of you. I can imagine it must be hard to have reached her like you did. You understood that the only way to get to her was to weaken her by talking to her after you understood what befell her. It was truly a psychological perspicacious ploy and it worked. And even though your intentions were never to take her life, but to save her, you did.’

He stepped closer and made a movement with his hands.

‘You see, you broke open the stone shell around her heart. It was for self protection a wall around her heart had turned to stone and she kept it that way by magic. With your wise, genuine words and love you must have broken the wall and touched the sleeping crystal which was her true heart inside. Something I have tried for years. It must have lasted long enough without closing over, even though it must have confused and probably angered her; it would have taken her lots of energy and time to restore it, which there wasn’t. That must have been a secret of hers, which I suspected but couldn’t be sure of.’ And he drew a deep breath, darting his eyes around the room, which hadn’t changed much since he last seen it, three-hundred years ago. ‘Great power demands an equal sacrifice; her heart. And with that sacrifice came a great responsibility.’

And he glanced at the blonde woman and smiled kindly. ‘You Tirsas, took advantage of that precious weak moment of hers and acted wisely by

stabbing into her exposed heart.’ He nodded approvingly. ‘You have proven yourself to be an excellent team. Alone you could never have done it. Tirsa could not; because she lacked the patience, compassion and insight to open her up and Artride could not; because she lacked the courage to actually try and kill her. Although she did kill the evil *in* her or made a start. However, who knows what he or she is capable of when you have to do it by yourself? What matters now is the final result. Thousands of lives are saved, Dochas *and* Ceartas are free at last!’ and he spread his arms and seemed to rise in height while a green-bluish light surrounded him.

The women could not help but smile and jumped into each other’s arms; still hardly able to fathom the magnitude of their actions. They held each other close. Words were not needed. They had succeeded in their task. All Tirsa whispered in Artride’s ear was, ‘You were amazing.’

Now all that was left was to ask for the counter spell and return home.

‘Of course you shall have the spell, and all you ask for!’ Eolas gloriously said.

‘And I am sure the TalamhClann agree with me.’

‘Yes, what about the servants, is the spell on them released as well?’

‘Indeed, but they must be very confused, so I must see to them at once!’

‘Can we come with you?’ Artride asked.

‘I’m sorry, it will disturb them too much to meet more people. They will have to heal first and that might take some time. I will show you the fastest way out and we’ll meet outside later.’

First they came into a big hall with huge statues that Eolas had long ago sculptured, according to him. Then there were three natural corridors and two of them different parts of the cave, but only one to the western part: the exit. That had to be the middle one according to the god and trusting him they took that corridor. It was colder here and they ran a little to get warmer, but there were lots of loose rocks on the sandy floor.

‘She did not take much care of this part of the cave. It looks abandoned,’ the queen stated.

‘At least it looks more natural and that gives me a better feeling.’

‘Do you think all of the magic illusions disappeared with her death?’

‘Probably, yes, why?’ Tirsa asked back.

‘No particular reason, but it explains this cold corridor. If it’s the only way out she had to use this corridor as well, occasionally. It must have been prettier when she was alive, I reckon.’

‘Like everything was.’ Tirsa stopped for a moment staring at the queen. ‘Do you regret it?’

‘What? Regret what?’ she asked incredulously.

‘Well ... taking her life, leaving—’

‘How dare you say such a thing, Tirsa? You know better than that!’ and she braced herself against the cold, narrowing her eyes at her companion.

Tirsa bit her lip in remorse and stared at her bare feet. ‘I do, I’m sorry. It’s just ... her magic, her presence was very overwhelming to us all.’

‘It was, but don’t you ever imply again that I would have wanted a different outcome to all of this. It’s true of course I would have wanted to keep Sempervirens alive to give her the chance to heal. And with that she

could have had another chance in helping us and the rest. But alas, there was too little time for that anyway and her distrust too great. But you heard Eolas! It's supposed to be this way. Roalda will be pleased too. Dochas is free and Ceartas soon is! How could I regret that? How could I not want this? We can discuss whether I want to be a queen or not, or whether I want to escape my fate; but do I want freedom for my country? Of course I do! And freedom for all these kind and magical beings? Yes, yes, yes!'

'Are you angry at me?' Tirsa suddenly asked, silently walking on the sand, trying to avoid the rocks.

Artride's breathing became slower and her eyes gentle again.

'I just thought you knew me better by now.'

'I do. I know you want to save the whole world if possible and I don't blame you for wanting to save her. On the contrary, I ... admire you for that.'

'But you wonder if I would have killed her?'

Tirsa's eyes softened and acknowledged the question.

Artride sighed. 'Well, let's not forget I wasn't alone. You reminded me of the importance of our mission. You were my conscience, Tirsa and I thank you for that.'

Tirsa nodded and shuddered suddenly, feeling a little cold walking in this unheated part of the cave.

'We made it happen, let's never forget that, together. We're both tired.' And Artride grabbed her hand and led her further into the dark corridor.

It was long and winding at points, and heavily covered with rocks, like they had come down to block their way. 'Perhaps this was how it originally was like,' Artride pointed out.

After some miles it became even darker, to a point where it was impossible to distinguish anything. All they knew was that they had to go straight forward. Sometimes they stumbled on rocks and nearly fell. Both of their feet felt bruised and battered, and even though they were close to the exit, both of them were near fatigue.

‘Careful, Artride, these rocks – ouch!’

‘What is it?’

Artride got no answer and she searched in the dark for Tirsa with her hands. She touched her head; she was sitting on the ground.

‘What happened, Tirsa?’

Tirsa moaned softly, sobbing tremendously, unable to speak. Artride knelt down, touching her hair, her shoulders.

‘Where does it hurt?’

‘My leg,’ she hissed through clenched teeth, and whimpered in pain like a puppy.

The queen moved her hands towards her leg and felt the bone stick out through the skin. ‘Gods,’ she whispered horrified, but soothingly to Tirsa, not wanting to upset her, ‘It’s broken, Tirsa. The sooner we are outside the sooner I can fix it and ease your pain. Come on, lean on me.’

‘I can’t ... it hurts so much.’

Artride stood and used all her remaining strength to help her up. Tears were running down her face from pain as she leaned on the queen and her good leg; panting and sweating heavily.

‘I feel sick.’

‘Hold on, lean on me. You are used to pain, you’ll live. Come on.’

Tirsa did not move an inch, but just held on to the queen before doubling over and retching over her shoulder, away from the queen.

Artride rubbed her back and gave her a moment.

‘We can stand here all day – or night – whatever it is anyway, but that won’t do you any good. I cannot heal you in here, Tirs. The sooner we’re out, the quicker I can take away your pain.’

‘I can’t ... go on, A ... Artride. Just ... leave me ... here.’ She felt suddenly so very tired, as if finally she could let go now they had found their prize. As if all her energy had gone into that and was now drained.

‘What? Do not talk that way, come on.’ And she tried to drag her with her, but Tirsa objected and sat down.

‘No ... don’t. It hurts too much. I need some rest. You ... go on. You’ve got what you came for. Eolas will meet you outside. Leave me ... here. Go.’

‘Just hold on to me, Tirs. I shall get you out of here, but you must help a little. I cannot drag you out or carry you as I cannot see much. Stand on your good leg and jump like this, do not worry about the other leg.’

She heard the other woman swallow hard. ‘I’ll just sit here.’

‘Listen to me! Just a few more steps –’ and she suddenly stopped talking. ‘You feel that? It’s the wind, Tirs, I felt the wind! It’s not long now; the outside world is close, the trees and the grass, smell it! I can even smell the ocean! That’s right, the ocean, Tirs! The ocean no one has ever seen from inland! We’ll be the first humans after Sempervirens to see it, Tirs. Come on, that surely is worth telling your brother!’

‘I’m no longer needed, Artride. I should have had to protect and encourage you ... not the other way around,’ she said, drunk with tiredness and defeat.

‘Oh, but you are mistaken, I still need you.’ Her voice suddenly became a whisper and then a sob. Was it possible she was crying?

‘If ... you give up now ... it will feel like losing the battle. Perhaps the most important battle in your life.’

‘My life ... is yet to begin,’ Tirsa muttered, panting heavily. She leaned on the queen for comfort as she heaved herself up, limping on her left leg.

‘Good!’

A few more feet away the scent of the evening mixed with that of the sea filled the air of the cave corridor. It gave them the strength to carry on. It was getting windy in the corridor and that scented breeze of fresh air filtered through their heads. *The Windchildren are near.*

A beam of light blinded them, and only after several blinks did they realize it was the light of the full moon they bathed in, reflected on the cave wall. A few more steps and they saw the edge of the cave’s mouth and the dark evening sky littered with stars. The moon smiling down on them.

A strong breeze welcomed them and lifted up a few strands of both women’s hair, and dried the tears on their stone-white faces. Fresh air, finally. They stood a few moments just breathing it in, frozen at the spot, overwhelmed with mixed emotions of joy and disbelief, sorrow and happiness, before Tirsa collapsed. Artride grabbed her under her armpits just in time, otherwise she would have hit the ground hard.

Outside, the queen gently laid Tirsa on the grass a couple of inches away from the cave and knelled down by her. She stared at the moon and the sea, breathing in the scented purifying air and glow. Closing her eyes, she concentrated and meditated to regain herself before she started chanting, placing her healing hands on the right broken leg of her partner.

It took some time, but she felt power radiating from within, through her hands, which were glowing with an inner heat by now; restoring and mending the bone and damaged veins and skin. Tirsa had not woken up yet, but she decided not to stir her. Her breathing was steady and

her pulse even. She had slipped into a normal sleep. Her body and mind needed the welcome, healing sleep.

‘I could use some too,’ she said looking at Tirsa, who appeared serene and peaceful in her sleep. The waves of the sea roared and thundered as the white horses crashed upon the shores of the sandy beach.

‘An ocean no human had ever seen,’ she whispered, and stared at the dark ocean not very far from her, embodying glitters and sparkles; reflecting the moon and stars.

Looking back at the dark cave’s mouth, which lay open and unhidden underneath the grass covered dunes, knowing the treacherous path through the mountains to reach this side of the cave to be almost impossible, and from the sea magically protected, she sighed. From this side it looked like a normal cave and she guessed now it was again, but still it was hard to fathom the passing few days, weeks? She hoped they were still in time. It all seemed so surreal; the only reminder being the stained and torn white nightgowns they still wore. Not to mention the bruises and scars they both had over their entire bodies; but she was too tired to heal them all right now. She curled herself up beside Tirsa, spooning her, putting an arm around her for warmth and comfort. It was a little chilly, but not all too cold to sleep. There was some dried grass and she covered them both with it as much as possible and that was surprisingly warm; even from underneath them came a warmth.

Soon Artride fell asleep, with the sound of the surf in the background; feeling safe and sound, alive and utterly complete for the first time in days, no ... weeks.

~ ~ ~

Warm beams of sunlight glowed on two sleeping beings. Their eyes were closed and their breathing was steady and soft. Cuddled closely together

one would assume they were lovers or sisters; not divided by rank. Just two human beings asleep.

A soft breeze of the spring wind tenderly caressed the two women; their skin, their long hair and thin torn dresses. But the wind was warm and comfortable; all the elements ensured these two beings would never again experience discomfort on their behalf. .

From now on these children of Talamh would be spoiled by the rain, the sun, the moon, the wind and all the other creatures which would be their brothers and sisters.

They didn't know yet, as they lay sleeping a dreamless sleep.

The long dune grass waved in the wind, dancing in joyous glory and freedom. Nature had its way again and no longer would it be affected by the tight unnatural grip of the human sorceress.

A young rabbit, which had been nibbling herbs and grass, spotted the two sleeping humans and curiously sniffed their faces.

Tirsa felt the soft nose and whiskers on her face and moved her hand to itch her nose. The rabbit jumped away and Tirsa followed it with her eyes. Sitting up, she saw the deep blue of the sea and smelled its fresh salty air. The sun stood high in its orbit and reflected on the water like gold waiting to be found beneath the surface of the sea. She narrowed her eyes against the sudden brightness. Little did she remember how she got here and she tried to search her clouded mind. Oh yes, the cave, her leg ...

Quickly she glanced at it; but already knew it to be healed, for she felt no pain or spotted any sign of the broken bone. Peeking at a sleeping Artride she smiled. She must have carried her here; as exhausted as she must have been herself, and she glared over to the cave opening not far away. She removed the dried grass which had proven to be warm and stood. She felt achy and battered all over, and she took a few deep breaths,

stretching her stiff limbs. But it didn't matter, her body would heal; she was free again.

Walking over to the beach, she enjoyed the feeling of the warm sand underneath her bare feet and between her toes. She kneeled and scooped a handful of it, to let it slip between her fingers and be softly blown away by the breeze, and then she remembered the sorceress's ashes ... mournfully, but with triumph.

It felt good to get in touch with the outside world again and she realized she'd missed it. All of it; the wind on her face, through her hair, along her skin, the scents it brought. The warmth of the sun, the horizon, and to be able to see as far as the eye could reach. Her freedom ...

The ocean looked enormous and she spotted no islands or other indication of land. Seabirds dotted the sky, soaring in flight and in the water. She thought she spotted a grey seal, poking his head above before diving. The sky was greenish blue and the sun bright and warm on her skin. She stood staring for a long time, marvelling in it, letting go of the past memories and taking in the sound of the waves and the fresh cleansing air, clearing her mind. Her world was different now ...

Artride woke up, not long after and as she joined Tirsa they greeted each other with a simple nod and smile. Both were silent. *It's over now.* Artride thought. *All over.*

While Tirsa thought, *My life begins ...*

After some time they felt a presence behind them and both looked over their shoulder to see a couple of small fragile children standing on the lowest dune near the beach. They smiled and waved at the women, gesturing them to come, which they did after exchanging a surprised glance.

There were five of them, and as they came closer they saw their skin was green and blue, as were their clothes. And they recognised one of them.

‘Shanta,’ Artride said with mixed emotions.

Shanta bowed deeply; her long dark blue hair touching the grass. She shoved it behind her long ears; her skin deeply forest green under the sun. Her eyes shone bright and she smiled at them warmly.

‘Hello again fair ladies. We thought it to be nicer to have you welcomed by someone you know.’

‘Well, the last time we met was rather awkward and embarrassing, Shanta,’ Artride said.

‘Could you explain to us where you went all of a sudden; leaving us confused and –’

‘I am most sorry for that, I am!’ she honestly answered. The other four TalamhClann children were silent and listening.

‘As you probably guessed I was under a spell. As I was reading your minds, the Dominator as I now know she was, listened and ordered me to mess things up. She was in my mind! It was entirely against my will. All I cared for was my Green Valley and my waterfall; to save it, and she preyed on that desire, as she used to prey on my brothers’ desires to be with her.’

‘It’s alright, we understand now,’ The queen soothed her. ‘Is your valley completely restored again, now that she’s gone?’

‘Oh, yes, thanks to you. I have no words to thank you for that, but come.’ And she clutched both their hands, which reminded them of the last time she did that. But they’d forgiven her in their hearts.

‘We have arranged a big celebration to show our gratitude to you. We would like to thank you properly in our own way.’

‘Are all the Wind – and Woodchildren there?’ Tirsa asked.

‘As many as possible! As soon as we felt the strings released we knew you did it and then the ancient God of Insight explained it to the wind and the Windchildren carried the joyous message; we are free! We have never been so happy!’ and she jumped up and down, and the other children giggled and danced as well.

‘We are glad for you, but really we have to return home, and Eolas said he would meet us here,’ Artride interrupted.

Shanta stopped dancing. ‘Yes, we know, but the party is just one night and you’ll be tremendously generously rewarded.’

‘That is very kind of your people, but we really do not have much time.’

‘Yes, I remember, don’t worry about that now, Lady Moonlight.’

‘Lady Moonlight?’ Artride said with raised eyebrows.

‘That’s what we call you.’ And she smiled a big smile.

‘Why?’ she asked smiling, her eyes glowing, sparkling bright.

‘Because you resemble our moon goddess a great deal; your looks and your wisdom. It’s really meant as a big compliment.’

‘And how do you call me?’

Shanta stared at Tirsa in reply and smiled with naughty eyes. ‘Snake Eyes.’

Tirsa’s green eyes grew bigger and she shrugged her shoulders in slight disappointment.

‘Right.’ She said a bit annoyed.

‘Snakes are very witty and quick like you, and your eyes are remarkably green; almost inhuman.’

Tirsa cleared her throat. ‘Thank you,’ she nodded gratefully, feeling a little better at that.

‘Looks like you might have found your animal guiding spirit,’ Artride whispered. ‘The soldiers call you ‘The Snake’ and now they do; why, it must be true then!’ and she laughed, touching Tirsa’s arm tenderly. She, at first, was somewhat offended, but as everyone was laughing she found it hard not to join in. She could not remember having laughed in a long time and it felt good.

As they were walking through the grassy dunes towards an oak wood, Tirsa asked Shanta: ‘How long have we been in the cave anyway? We’ve lost track of time you see.’

‘Well, all together we counted seven days and seven nights.’

‘A whole week!’ Artride spoke devastated and stared at Tirsa. ‘But, at least it means that Elimar is alive still. How more days have we got left to be in time?’

‘Since we’ve left the castle it’s been a little over two weeks, Artride. On foot we’re never going to be on time! And how are we going to travel anyway through these treacherous mountains?’

‘Sweet ladies, easy now. I promise on behalf of all of us you’ll be on time. We know everything about the three weeks sentence of your brother, Snake Eyes. You do not have to worry about the journey home.’

‘Oh.’ Tirsa could see herself floating back in on of those drifting solid clouds in which Kasching brought them to the cave. She told Artride they probably had that in mind for them.

‘Alright, just one day and night and then we’ll have to leave.’ And she was rather curious about the celebration. ‘Is Eolas going to be there?’ she said looking around.

‘Of course.’

They passed a small lake which buzzed with life. They spotted frogs, dragonflies looking for a mate and ... water lilies. ‘These look real,’

Tirsa mentioned surprised.

‘That’s because they are,’ Shanta added not understanding.

They still had to adapt to the fact that everything from now on would be real again; even if they still were in the Magical Land; from now on it would be natural magic.

The oak wood was ancient and the last wood before the great mountain range began. A high natural wall cut this part off from the rest of the world. Birds were singing in the canopy overhead and flowers decorated the grassy floor and butterflies danced in the air.

‘It feels great being outside again,’ Tirsa sighed.

Going deeper into the wood they spotted round tree huts. ‘So this is where Woodchildren live?’ Artride said in wonder.

‘This is a village,’ Shanta explained to them. ‘But most live in the woods, valleys and mountains. We need not much shelter really; other than what nature has to offer us. But here we gather and stay over longer periods and share information,’ Shanta explained.

‘Very close to the sorceress’ cave, though,’ Artride mentioned.

‘I know, but we were here first, we left once we understood the danger. It stood empty for centuries. At last we occupy it again,’ she said joyfully.

The other children ran off to join the rest of the group, chanting the names of their saviours.

Woodchildren were gathered in small groups talking to each other, but as the women appeared they stopped and stared at them in wonder. Soon they started to cheer, laugh and cry at the same time, but the two women did not experience this as noise of any kind; but as music to their ears, for that was what it was. They clasped hands together as they soon

were singing to them in their own tongue, a lovely heartbreaking, welcome song. Men, women and children all joined in.

Their voices were pure, high and harmonious; straight from the heart. It touched their own hearts and warmed them all over. Tears were building up in the eyes of the heroes and it was impossible not to weep.

A dark, tall man separated from the group after the song and came to greet them.

‘Welcome, you’re the first humans ever to see this secret place,’ Eolas said, his arms widely spread; side-glancing at an approaching woman left of him.

‘Roalda!’ Artride called out and covered her mouth in disbelief.

‘My, you two have become thinner!’ The white lady said sliding closer. She looked less transparent than when they’d last seen her.

‘That’s the first thing you say to us?’ Tirsa asked her with one eyebrow up.

‘Just to let you know now that you have reached a heroic status, you will have to live up to your statuesque,’ she said quite seriously.

Artride looked down at herself; at the stained torn dress and her dirty arms and legs. ‘Yes, well, I suppose we do need to shape ourselves up a bit.’

‘A bit? You two look like you’ve had a journey through the insides of a mountain troll!’

She looked up to see Roalda laughing. ‘Very nearly,’ she answered smiling.

Roalda embraced them closely so that the three of them were standing head to head.

‘Thank you so much,’ she whispered in their hair. ‘I have regained my powers now and everyone is free again.’ Roalda embraced them both

tightly as she would have with her own children. She looked very proud.

‘Do you hear that music?’ Eolas interrupted. They sharpened their ears and heard a faint drum and a number of flute tones deeper in the woods.

‘They haven’t stopped playing ever since it was clear The Dominator is gone and won’t be back. Come and eat with us,’ he said as he touched their fingertips lightly.

‘Eolas,’ Artride said thankfully, ‘we are more than honoured, but where were you? Tirsa broke her leg near the cave exit and it was so dark!’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’ he said looking at Tirsa’s leg.

‘I have healed her, but still. I thought you left us.’

‘Now, now, I wouldn’t do that!’ and he beckoned them to follow him.

They came closer to the tree huts and on the meadow a long table stood, covered with good food from the woods; berries, mushrooms, salads, honey, nuts and roots and bread. It was hard not to taste all of it and eat fast; but they reminded themselves to eat slow and not to stuff themselves, since their stomachs had shrunk during the journey, even if they did have a little food in the cave.

The rest of the TalamhClann joined and ate as well. The Woodchildren talked quietly with one another, leaving the two women at peace as they ate; knowing that they would get to hear the entire story sooner or later. The atmosphere was peaceful and cheerful and laughs and giggles were to be heard all over the table. They felt accepted and respected; something Artride had never experienced in this fashion. She told Tirsa so and she replied in a matter of fact voice, ‘Well of course, people could learn a lot from these children of nature. No one judges and there is never strife or battle between them. They fight their inner demons

at a young age so that they unite their shadows with their bright side. Balance is their secret.'

'Well spoken, Tirsa,' Eolas said, sitting opposite them, who had been listening. 'It sounds you hold a great respect for them.'

'Of course. I used to encounter Woodchildren during my strolls and during these short wonderful meetings I've gained a huge respect. They're always giving and never asking anything back, but now that I've done something for them I guess they'll let us into their hearts?'

He smiled a warm smile. 'You were always special to them so I have heard, but you'll get a chance to meet many more later on and learn that you will always be in their hearts from now on, both of you.'

After dinner they washed themselves in a pleasant, clear lake and they received new clothes. A dark blue velvet dress to the knees for Artride, lined with golden laces, and a dark green velvet one for Tirsa. The belt was a soft brown rope made from the bark of an oak tree. The leggings were both tight, stretchy black velvet, and the boots were the only piece of clothing made from leather.

'Deer,' Eolas explained later to them as they were fully dressed. 'Sometimes an animal dies or is left after a predator has eaten it; only then they use the skin and bones. 'You look beautiful the both of you.' And they did. Clean and rested, and newly dressed they also felt a lot better.

'I do not know how to thank them for this,' Artride whispered to Eolas and he winced at her in conspiracy. 'By wearing it you already have. You are a delight for their and ... my eyes.'

She coloured at that and smiled, confused, for she had not suspected them or him to be interested, but of course, even though he was immortal, he also was a male. He and Sempervirens surely had had a sexual relationship.

‘Eolas,’ Tirsa interrupted, frowning. ‘I have not seen any Windchildren yet, how come?’

‘They have lost a great number of members to the whims of Sempervirens,’ he said painfully, with almost something that showed as guilt in his eyes. ‘A lot more than the Woodchildren in fact. They mourn and celebrate this news in their own way, but hopefully will join tonight.’

‘How do we have to behave during this party?’ Artride asked carefully.

‘Just be yourself, Artride. We do not expect anything from you. We’ve already got more than we ever could have hoped for. That counts for me too. You have freed me and them. We will always be in your debt.’

‘We did what we had to do.’

‘No, you could have chosen differently, but you did not.’

‘I just wanted to help.’

‘Yes, and you forgot about yourself –’

‘And my mission.’ Artride interrupted him with sad eyes.

‘You just followed your kind heart and got lost in the moment; but you knew something good would come out of it, it had to and it did.’

‘Luckily it did, but it could have ended worse. If it wasn’t for Tirsa —’

‘Hush, now, Artride,’ Tirsa said. ‘Don’t put yourself through this again. It’s over now.’

‘That’s right; tonight we’ll celebrate the outcoming of this; not what might have been!’ Eolas said cheerfully and gave them a glass of a bubbling drink. ‘Drink this and you’ll feel better.’

‘Alcohol?’ Artride asked.

‘No, something far better; drained from a special flower, drink. It’s kind of sweet and it gives you energy.’

Artride put the glass to her lips and sipped it; tasting the transparent liquid which caressed her tongue and throat delicately. ‘Hmm, it tastes delicious.’ And she nodded at Tirsa; urging her to drink.

The three of them drank and laughed the rest of the afternoon, forgetting the past worries and troubles.

That evening, when the sun had set, orange and pink had painted the sky. Drums welcomed them deeper into the woods where large torches along the path gave off a reddish glow. A large crowd had gathered on a clearing, sitting on the soft dry mulch and grass of the forest floor and some on blankets. A big fire was burning in the middle of the circle. A huge pile of old branches and dead wood had been built up outside the circle; so that the fire could be fed all through the night. They spotted Roalda among them and she looked like she was glowing herself. How she kept her white dress so spotless was a mystery.

‘It almost looks like you’re their parents or leaders,’ Tirsa said in wonder. ‘But I thought they didn’t have any need for a leader?’

‘That’s right,’ Eolas answered kindly. ‘We’re very close to them, but we don’t lead them. They respect us like we respect them and we often cross their paths; well, I used to before I was captured of course. But Roalda and I have different tasks; mine is more concerned with humans and their path of learning through suffering, since the TalamhClann already posses a great sense of insight and walk a different path than humans do altogether. Roalda knows people better in her job in dealing with all mortals.’

‘You’re not married then?’ Artride joked, feeling light-headed from the drink.

He laughed. ‘We cross paths occasionally and are old friends. Remember I was born a mortal, but she’ll never guide me to the Afterlife,

nor bring me back from it for that matter.’ And he glanced, smiling at Tirsa who laughed as well. Eolas was as dark as Roalda was white; it was as if they were opposites on the outside, but they sure looked close when one saw them together; they were as one.

‘My friends,’ Roalda spoke as they entered the bonfire making eye contact with the two women, ‘we have a wonderful night for you in store; come sit at the fire and let your friends entertain you.’

They got up to sit down among the Woodchildren who sat in a big circle around the fire; shaking their hands and speaking warm words in thanks.

‘Can you feel the power of the circle of life?’ Roalda continued, smiling. Indeed, there was a strong power radiating from the circle; from within or without they were not sure. Certainly a great love and appreciation from the TalamhClann, they reckoned.

‘Of course from us, but the stars tonight stand in a particular pattern, and this circle makes a connection with that same pattern, linking to it; extracting a power full of uplifting healing energy. The very essence the TalamhClann needs in order to heal and continue their lives.’

Tirsa thought back to the many symbols she had seen in Sempervirens/Sovalis’ home, mainly circles; even the Snake biting its own tail. Biting back the frustration that she was called Snake Eyes as she didn’t want to be compared to the sorceress as such, she did, however, wonder what all those circles had meant to Sempervirens.

As if Roalda heard her thinking, she spoke, ‘And of course, everything in life is a circle in many ways as everything returns and life goes on and on, round and round, never changing, but does it? We worship, unlike some we’ve known; not the Circle, but –’ and Roalda grabbed a stick and drew something in the sand in front of the fire. ‘But the Spiral.’

Smiling, she explained, 'For the Spiral symbolises change; it can go upwards if you look at it in depth or downwards. Our Spiral has been going downwards too long. That has changed.'

The crowd started to clap and Roalda's gaze turned towards the Woodchildren, and she spoke something in their tongue; one of them attended the fire and as Roalda was speaking to the group in front of her, Tirsa glanced at the Woodchild next to her, feeling her gaze upon her; a blonde maiden with long limbs; caressing with her tender fingers the frame of her harp. She could hardly wait to begin to play her song. Tirsa smiled at the girl.

'This must feel strange for you,' Tirsa whispered softly. 'A celebration party for two humans, while it was humans who turned your world upside down in the first place.'

The Woodchild's face stayed serene when she answered, 'It is true we have a sad history with mankind; they forced us to leave our woods and valleys. And they treat our dear brothers and sisters, the animals, cruelly. It was also a human who held us imprisoned for over two centuries in a small part of the world; shielding us from our friends and duties. And the same person tricked us and used and misused us.' And she closed her eyes, like she was chasing away those memories from her mind. There had been no women Woodchildren in the cave; but surely she had heard stories from the male slaves; now free but most likely traumatised.

'But we know you are different, you have proven that. And although there are no guarantees, we have learned that all too well; we know you will never be like her. There is just one big question we all have.'

'And that is?' Artride asked, who had been eavesdropping over Tirsa's shoulder.

‘Why? Why did she do all those things to us? What had we ever done to her?’

The queen sighed deeply. ‘It’s not easy to explain in a few words, but she really did not have anything personal against your people. You see, she was highly jealous of your youth and the lasting of your beauty and good health.’

‘But I heard she was very beautiful herself and appeared young; very much like us. Why torment us when she had all this, besides her magic, which is more than most humans can say?’

‘It was given to you by nature. Sempervirens on the other hand eventually would grow old and in her eyes ugly and feeble; she was still mortal and would die one day,’ Tirsa answered. ‘If she had not found a way to barricade her beating heart with a wall. With it she was indeed immortal. She had to use powerful magic in order to maintain her beauty as well. I think she admired you people very much in an odd, sick way; but to her it was a special way, unlike how she would treat a human. Artride and I had much hardship whilst in her home; she played with our minds, bodies and souls, driving us slowly insane. We were beaten, tossed and turned, tricked, starved and imprisoned literally. And oh yes, she did feed us and we had some luxuries; but only when she tried to persuade us to stay. I think your people might have been better off, from what I’ve seen; she tried to keep you as pets or objects of beauty. Servants yes, slaves to her whims, but she never knew kindness herself, so in her world she perhaps didn’t mean bad. To have you around her must have reminded her of her own natural youth and innocence. Perhaps it became sometimes a little too much; therefore the cruelty and her own dreadful past taught her nothing but cruelty. Indeed you had casualties so I’ve heard and I’m sorry.’

The girl lowered her head, but nodded with respect. She understood what Tirsa had tried to say.

‘We shall tell you all you want to know,’ Artride added. ‘So it will not be forgotten.’

‘Katasha Amanthi,’ she said. ‘Thank you.’

‘What’s your name?’ Artride asked her.

‘Mhaari.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Mhaari.’ And she lightly shook hands with her as only a queen could do.

‘You have a rich life.’

‘Don’t you, where you live?’ the girl asked.

Artride’s smile vanished thinking about her home; her riches and wealth, but then she thought about the beauty of the land, and the harmony she could create there now with a different law system, and she smiled.

‘We people tend to forget what we’ve got or what we could have if we wanted to. We are not as harmonious by nature as you are. But perhaps we could learn and should try harder to create a paradise like this.’

‘It’s hard to change people and their lifestyles,’ Tirsa added. ‘Especially if they have been living it a certain way for generations.’ And she thought of the dialogue between Artride and the sorceress about throwing water on a fire. ‘Habits, traditions are always hard to change; even if many people are doing it and in fact are bad. It all starts from within and we should teach our children a better way and give them a good example; so that they can grow up in a healthy, harmonious society, free from hate and violence.’

Mhaari smiled at them. ‘If humans were all like you it could certainly happen.’

Music started to play near the fire. A small group played on their instruments; drums, flute and a harp. It sounded harmonic and joyous. Many stood up and started to dance; inviting others to join, and clasping hands everyone formed an enclosed spiral that moved round and round each other and danced forward and backwards in a well trained balance. And of course the women were invited as well and soon took up the pattern of the dance.

It was a long, enchanting dance and the fire was warm on their bodies, and the laughs and shouts were cheerful and many. The full moon rose soon and shone its white light on the group of TalamhClann; her children.

After the tiring dance they seated and Roalda appeared again. She had not joined the dance, but had talked to Eolas instead. Together they made such a lovely couple, Artride kept thinking.

She stepped into the circle again, and after all was still again she said in a kind voice,

‘We are gathered here tonight, not only to celebrate this monthly Moonfest, but to thank and honour our new friends, Artride and Tirsia.’ She left out their titles deliberately since it had no meaning here.

‘They set out on a perilous journey and continuously risked their lives for freedom and justice. Their quest was for the Dominator to ask her for a counter spell, which she could easily have made for them, especially after all the tests they endured and passed. Instead, she decided she wanted to keep them to add to her collection. Having met Eolas they found out about her sad history. They faced another quest which was entangled with their own and even more dangerous. Their love for life chased away evil and they’ve proven that love always conquers in the end; always!’ And she spread her arms widely so that the orange yellow light of the fire curved

her feminine body, which seemed to glow instead of being white, with pure fire now; a warm, friendly and welcoming fire.

Everyone clapped and cheered loudly, and looked at the two women with sparkling, loving eyes. Roalda too, smiled at them with love and respect; beckoning to them to stand and join her, which they did.

She grabbed their hands and held them high and an even louder applause sounded in the nightly wood.

She gestured at Eolas who stood, carrying something in his hands that looked like a piece of flat wood.

‘Eolas.’ She bowed lightly for him and stepped back a little.

‘Right, now my turn to thank you,’ he spoke as he came in between them. He stared at his hands and lifted them. He turned to Artride and handed her carefully, as if it was alive, a slab of wood. She took it and stared at it.

‘This, my friend, is what you came for. What you searched high and low for.’

Artride swallowed away a lump in her throat and felt tears swelling in her eyes. This was such a big moment ...

And of course they knew what he was about to say, ‘It holds the counter spell for the curse.’

She stared through misted eyes at the flat, striped piece of carved wood about as big as her hand; it felt warm and smooth in her hands and had small black letters that looked as if they were burned in. She could not read the words for the tears streaming over her cheeks. All she could think of was her father who died for it and all those years, all those people who had lost their lives to the curse.

‘Thank you, Eolas,’ Artride managed to say, and felt Tirsa’s hand in hers behind Eolas’ back.

He touched his heart and bowed, stepping back again. Roalda stepped forward, giving her a moment. The crowd was silent too.

‘It wasn’t that arduous to find an appropriate gift for you two; one that will stay with you throughout your life. And it will be most helpful in times of need *and* speed.’ She winked.

Artride and Tirsia exchanged a confused look.

‘You have already helped us and ... Kasching and Eolas did,’ Tirsia stammered.

‘We have only guided you.’

‘But we are here and we’ve got the counter spell. That is the biggest gift of all, really,’ the queen stated and glanced around at the lovely beings she only dreamed of until now. And she touched the slab of wood lovingly.

‘That is really all I came for.’

‘True, however you did more and so you shall be rewarded properly; something truly for yourself, something you do not have to share ...’ Roalda said.

‘That’s too kind –’ Tirsia muttered.

‘You still do not comprehend the magnitude of your doings.’ Roalda smiled. ‘You have set out to restore the freedom and justice of your country. We, ourselves, never had that much luck, not even with all our powers, right here in Dochas. Every quest we set out to the cave to rescue our kind was doomed to be a failure. That you of all people succeeded is something we should be envious of. Being human was an advantage for sure; she wanted you to come *to* her, despite her distaste for mankind. She much expected it from the TalamhClann to outwit her, so she was on her guard all the time. She underestimated you, but perhaps deep down she wanted to heal; to change for the better, which almost happened. Well no

doubt we'll hear the complete story from you later on. But I only know that no one else could have done what you have accomplished. Therefore, our gift ...' and she walked around the two women and touched their backs softly. They felt a tingling, sensational electrical shock through their body and a sudden itch on their back. Glancing backwards they saw nothing; although it felt as if they were given a new body part.

Roalda faced them again and said loudly so everyone could hear, 'I give you the power of flight; Wings of our gratitude.'

CHAPTER 23

WINGS OF GRATITUDE

*My heart beats with yours, though we are apart
Your pulse hums the song that calls for the start
of the wish to forget the days I have mourned*

Celtic poem

At a loss for words they just stood numb, sensing something growing on their backs. It was a twitching, almost itching, tingling feeling, and even if they could not see their wings, they sure were there.

The sensation of the invisible wings felt a little odd; new and strange at their backs, but it wasn't so much of a weight and hardly noticeable at all when they did not think about it; but how could they not?

'Use them wisely and carefully,' Roalda spoke. 'It is not meant for human eyes to see you fly. So we ask for caution and secrecy. For all we know your kind would be knocking on our doors asking for wings!' and she seated herself among the Woodchildren.

The TalamhClann laughed.

They both thanked her, overwhelmed by this unique gift, which would be an ability they could only have dreamed of before. Both women, in fact, always had had dreams where they could fly freely. One could describe that as the wish to be truly carefree and above all responsibilities, which of course at times was true. But for now it meant most of all that they didn't have to worry about being back on time to lift the curse to prevent Elimar's death sentence. And they didn't have to worry about obstacles on their way –mountains, swamps, ravines. They were literally above all that now.

‘Normally wings are not given lightly,’ Eolas spoke to just the two of them a little later on.

‘Woodchildren only receive them after a major accomplishment of the soul. You see; you can possess a certain knowledge, but to act like it shows a great amount of true insight and wisdom. You truly have just that. Your joined effort has also proven again and again what a powerful team you are. To be honest, I think Sempervirens suspected that only together you could make a powerful friend or foe. She must have been intrigued; her curiosity was also her downfall. ’

Tirsa embraced Eolas, hiding her tears in his black cloak. He held her long and caressed her back.

When she withdrew, Artride fell into his arms and thanked him.

Music was heard again and they sat down and listened as they took it all in; the rhythmic beat of the drum, which was joined by the sound of flutes, the dancing and playing Woodchildren, the colours of their skin and clothes, the warm bonfire and the pale moon. The scents of the night and the drinks, the soft scent of the TalamhClann which tasted like earth and leaves on their tongue. And then the new idea of having wings to fly, it overwhelmed them to put it mildly.

The night passed by and new members came as did some Windchildren. They’d lost many of their kind to the sorceress.

Kasching was among the small group. His pale eyes shone brightly in the dark and his fair hair stood more erect than they remembered. He held a large instrument which hung from his shoulder; a sack with pipes attached; something both women had never seen and had no name for. He looked amused and clasped the hands of many Woodchildren, his closest relatives, as did the other Windchildren. They talked and laughed with many hand gestures as they spoke.

Artride and Tirsa also spotted another familiar face; it was another pale lad. They'd seen him in the cave in bed with the sorceress! He stood alone and had a numb look on his face. Nobody seemed to care for him; until one of his kind, a pale girl brushed his arm and led him over to sit by the fire.

It was clear he was still confused and needed time for his recovery.

'Should we go and talk to him?' Tirsa asked Artride.

'Better to ask one of his kind what they see fit.'

But now that most were there, they needed to tell the story of what happened in the cave.

Briefly, Artride told about the difficulties on their way towards the Domain of Sempervirens they had faced, before Tirsa began telling about the dark tunnels and all the enchantments of the sorceress to test their worthiness. Including the demon, their captivity and escape, the wonders and illusions, the magical mirror, and the living curtains. They listened with awe and amazement.

Artride told about meeting the Dominator, their conversations and their final test. The finding of the spell book and meeting Eolas was already known to most, and the outcome, but Artride told on to teach them more about the sorceress.

'She really was a victim herself, and her grief, remorse and wrath was something too great for her to carry on her own. Eolas was too close, too dear to her to help her. And too involved and blinded by love for her. She needed love of course, as we all do; we need to love and to be loved. But her heart was too hurt for that, she had built an almost unbreakable wall around it. The tragedy that befell her, led to making new victims. It was all she had ever known. Your kind was a triumph for her and she envied you highly; your beauty, your innocence, your kindness and

oneness with everything,’ and she glanced to one of the Windchildren. ‘Your immortality ... It was a strange way of showing her appreciation, I know, but she had nothing personal against you really. It was humans she despised and hated in truth, and it was them she wanted to conquer in the end; if she was to live longer. That would have been her greatest victory.’

‘But humans have no magic,’ a greenish looking lad with scarlet hair said, wondering. ‘At least, usually no ordinary humans and they are normally weaker than us. She got most of her magic from Eolas, after all, so why did she not start with humans?’

‘*They* are human too and they conquered her,’ another said, nodding at the two women.

‘That must mean they are greater than her.’

‘She was perhaps preparing herself for the ultimate revenge,’ Artride answered. ‘I suppose no real magic was needed in our case. We reasoned with her, showed compassion for her and softened her heart,’ Artride said. ‘It is true it would have been easier for her to use and misuse other humans instead of you,’ she admitted. ‘*They* had hurt her to begin with. Not the whole human race, but still, it would have made more sense. But she was preparing herself for them and sort of trained and gained power with you; even extracted energy from you, your magic. However, she was hardly human herself anymore, but mostly she forgot what it was like to *be* human. Moreover, she failed to understand humans in all their complexity. She at least knew you better; your good side, which is obvious. She studied you properly since there were rarely human visitors. From humans she knew only the dark side, which meant pain; or that was perhaps merely the only thing she was able to see. She therefore could not fathom there was a good side in humans too, also in herself. It is true humans stand further apart from nature; but we’re still mammals, even if

we do walk on two legs. She did not seem to see, or want to see the good side in humans; which is not all hating and destroying and molesting and using others. No it is loving and nurturing and caring and respecting others. That is why she would have failed in conquering them.'

They were silent, thinking to themselves.

'Seeing us, watching us all through our hardships in trying to find her,' Tirsa took over. 'we reminded her of herself and her own better human side, which she had abandoned or never was shown. Whichever way you want to put it. It led to her downfall. Artride showed her the will to help her, despite all the cruelties of the sorceress towards us. It seemed to work at first; even tears flowed and she let her come near her. But the sorceress still disbelieved that our intentions were genuine. Well, we did try to take her life, so who could blame her,' Tirsa said with a hidden sneer. 'Instead she wanted to kill us, until it was too late for her and the knife had already plunged through her heart.'

'You did that?' a girl asked with no judgement in her voice, just wonder.

'When I saw it was going nowhere – she never would have let Artride help her – I pushed the knife in that Artride already held to her chest to ward her off.'

Artride smiled at Tirsa about her wording. 'The only right thing to do, although at that time I wasn't so sure.'

'Later on Eolas told us, it was really the only way; it was too late to change her. She was too set in her ways, too hurt, too stubborn. Artride softened her heart, broke down the wall so to speak, so that she was vulnerable and ... mortal. We took her life at the right moment.'

Sighs of wonder and amazement were to be heard in the nightly woods.

Then it was time to relax and they drank some of that wonderful, pleasant flower drink and answered the questions the TalamhClann had.

Tirsa, however, had plenty questions for them, and now she finally had the chance to get them all answered. She asked them about their origin and their lifestyle, their wisdom and magic.

‘We are perhaps in some ways like you,’ a bluish girl told her. ‘We live side by side, but you hardly see us, for we can make ourselves invisible to your eyes if we want to. That’s much fun really.’ And she laughed. ‘But it’s safer for us to stay away from you people, because your negativity affects us and we can get ill from that.’

‘We live in another dimension,’ another Woodchild explained. ‘And see things differently; we see the souls of all living things, their auras extended and mingled in every way possible.’

‘We are related,’ again another said. ‘And we developed side by side; being intelligent beings on different planes, however, we stayed connected with our mother, while you people kept using her and returning little or nothing, forgetting to worship her and worse ... neglecting and using her; stripping the earth bare, building your cities where once proud forests stood.’

‘We are caretakers. We nurture the plants and surround the trees with love. We hear their voices,’ another said.

Artride suddenly remembered the entrapped people in the trees on their way to the cave and she asked them about their fate, and was told that their souls had at last found their way to the peace of death with the passing of the sorceress.

‘They could not return to their human shapes, being too old for that.’

The women listened to their stories and learned to understand their way of life, which was like the waxing of the moon; forever changing gradually, like everything in nature. And in a way they reminded them how they would like to live themselves; or should have if the circumstances would have been different. They got offers enough to stay and though tempting, they could of course not accept, at least not now. Their heads were tilting with all the knowledge they'd gained.

And their own story wasn't over by far. There still was a law book whose curse had to be lifted with the given counter spell and a brother who had to be freed. And the most challenging was for Artride alone; to set up a whole new law system for Ceartas. She would need lots of advisers and all of her wits about her in order to do that.

But that seemed so surreal and far away yet to Artride, whose mind was with the party, and she tried not to think about her coming task and most of all ... the passing days. She danced with members of the TalamhClann and with Eolas and Roalda. She hadn't had the chance yet to dance with Tirsa who looked carefree and joyous as well, clapping her hands and feet at the rhythm of the drums, laughing, swirling around from here to there, taking it all in. She seemed to glow like never before; happy.

She seemed to fit in here. Artride knew that in her heart she perhaps wanted to stay, although she would never admit to that; still dutiful and true to her queen and country. But would she stay that way ; would she change to her old unhappy, bitter self once they got back? Artride feared she would. She didn't want to see her unhappy ever again. So she wouldn't blame her if she did decide to return after her brother was freed ...

Artride's eyes followed her around with a warm glow in her heart, and she smiled sitting down for a moment. She thought about ways to thank her

once home; but she still had to come up with a proper gift. She knew Tirsa didn't care about titles and honour, so it had to be something else ... something – 'It has no birthplace, nor does it die anywhere,' a deep rich metallic voice suddenly rang in her ears. She turned around and stared into the pale blue eyes of Kasching. He smiled at her, perching down beside her. 'It created deserts, sank ships, felled entire forests, but carries leaves and seeds as well. It blows through cities with music and strange voices. It has no limits ...'

Artride wanted to smile at him, but realised he was stating a riddle for her and she narrowed her eyes. 'Don't tell me it's you who was in fact that creepy little tree creature with his riddles?'

He started laughing and threw his head backwards.

'What would you do to me if I had been?'

'Rip your head off?' she smiled sweetly and innocently at him.

He could not stop laughing, not in a mocking way; but in a genuinely amused way.

'I'm sorry to say we are not acquainted. I would have like to see you do that. I've heard stories about that creepy tree guard. He is gone now, rest assured. He was an old trapped soul himself, working for the queen.' And he got up, bowing before her.

'May I have this dance with you, Artride.'

She flushed at that and nodded, standing up.

'The wind does all those things you talked about,' she said and touched his arm, which felt warm and very alive. 'It does wonderful things, but it can be frightening as well.' And she remembered the storms rushing around the walls of the castle at nights when she lay alone in her bed, as big a castle as it was, the place still seemed to moan and howl.

‘You shall never be lonely ever again, Artride. You shall have our friendship, our company and our help into eternity. And we’re happy to give it to you. We are forever grateful.’ She wondered if he had read her mind ...

‘Be careful what you promise, Kasching, for eternity is a very long time.’

‘Indeed it is. However our promises are not lightly given; we stay true to them.’ His face turned a little tight and his mouth thin when he spoke, ‘No one can harness the wind, right? Wrong, the Dominator managed to keep one of our kind alive. I have talked to him and he said she was his wind all that time.’

‘She used magic ...’

‘Very powerful magic; for more than five Windchildren died before Dashim was captured. But she found a way to be his wind; very cunning.’

‘I saw him in the cave,’ she spoke softly.

Kasching stared at her. ‘How is he? Does he remember?’

‘Little, but enough. As do we all, as he shared it with us, but we recover quicker. He was treated well enough, cherished even, and it seems he was her favourite and therefore he had certain privileges. He feels ashamed, used, drained and worse ... empty.’

‘Did any of them try to fight her?’

‘Yes, but often that made things harder. Their souls were chained; away from their magic, from the source of their magic, stripped bare so to speak and enchanted. No free will.’

She felt sad, but then remembered it was over and all of the Wind and Woodchildren free, and she said so. ‘I just hope they recover soon.’

‘Right, let’s dance.’ And he extended his hand and guided her to the circle of dancing folk around the fire. All through the night there was

no more talking, but dancing on the rhythm of the cheerful music. She danced with Dashim as well, carefully, but he was visibly touched by the gesture.

Then a harpist started to play a gentle slow tune and all the other musicians stopped playing. Most of the TalamhClann sought out the person they loved to dance an intimate dance with. Artride saw that Tirsa bit her lip and made room for the dancing couples, feeling embarrassed, walking over to sit with the people who did not dance; which weren't many.

The queen was one of them, however she tried to make eye contact and suddenly Tirsa felt her stare and looked back. She stood up and faced her. Standing in front of her, she stood too and accepting her hands lightly in hers, they walked over to the other dancing couples and the dying fire. She smiled at her friend and Tirsa smiled timidly back. The harpist began to sing a sad song with her beautiful clear voice and all couples were dancing closely. For the first time they accepted their mutual bond. Had their bond become so strong because of their hardships and suffering together or was it more than that? Staring into each other's eyes a long time, they had no doubts. Their hands sought out their familiar waists and shoulders, without feeling discomfort or embarrassment. It felt right for both of them and they held each other close during the song; skin to skin, cheek to cheek, moving slow on the music. Their heartbeats so close.

When the song stopped, it seemed too soon; but it really had lasted longer than any of the songs so far. Reluctantly they parted; still holding hands, never letting go of each other. Roalda started to speak and they were all to be seated again.

It was said that years after that party, The Celebration of Heroes, was the most enchanted and special the TalamhClann had ever had. And

not only for the fact that it had hosted two humans, but for all the emotions and releasing of them, that had glowed through the night, and it was felt by all present, even after the bonfire had gone out ...

CHAPTER 24

HOMECOMING

The end of every quest is to become what you are.

The next morning for the first time after that magical evening and night, Artride picked up the slab of wood; the counter spell, given to her by Eolas and started to examine it.

She read the tiny black words encrypted in the wood:

When the sun meets the waning moon, Ceartas' king and his queen shall meet in my chamber in front of my book. The couple shall have in each corner a beeswax candle. One red for the blood of the Ceartasians shed, one black for their deaths, one blue for the tears shed and one pure white for the innocence lost. By this light their two bodies shall be as one. Only then shall I be lifted from the Law Book.

Artride felt her blood go cold. She read the words over and over again, emotions flaring.

‘No, no, no,’ was all she could say.

Tirsa, who was just coming her way, noticed immediately something wrong by the pale complexion on the queen’s face.

‘What is it?’ she glanced at the counter spell and read the words as well for the first time. They had been so occupied that they had not thought to do this until now.

Artride stood up. ‘I’ve got to find Eolas.’ And she ran away.

Perplexed Tirsa read, ‘When the sun meets the waning moon,’ That’s tomorrow morning and the two mornings after that. *That’s good, we’re on time.* But then she read on.

‘Ceartas’ king and his queen ...’ *That’s not good* ... and understood why Artride was so upset.

She has no king ...

Surely that meant that in order for the counter spell to work, she had to marry ...

~ ~ ~

‘You cannot be serious!’ Artride almost shouted at Eolas when she found him.

‘Ceartas’ king *and* his queen shall meet?’

‘Look, this is the counter spell the way it was made at the time when the curse was being drawn. There was a king at that time,’ Eolas calmly spoke, understanding her fury.

‘A king who was married. It also says, “His queen”!’

‘Every spell; or curse in this case, has its counterpart. So do people, for this curse two people are needed it seems.’

‘A married couple! I’m not married!’

‘Do not confuse me with someone else, Artride! I’m not responsible for this or to blame.’

‘You’re the one who gave it to me! Is there no other way? Can you not lift the curse another way? Please?’

‘I’m not like Sempervirens who could snap her fingers and do the impossible!’

Artride stared long into his face and looked away, almost in tears.

‘Is it so hard to accept that this might be the only way to lift the curse? That you will have to marry?’

She looked him in the eye and one big tear slowly rolled down her cheek when she said, ‘It means I have to find a king, whilst I thought I had found ... my ... queen.’

She walked away feeling numb.

~ ~ ~

Tirsa had been looking for Artride when she saw her sitting on one of the cliffs overlooking the sea. She was staring into the vast stretch of water. The sun was climbing higher in the sky; they had to leave soon.

‘Artride, we have to go now. Did you speak to Eolas or Roalda about this?’ And she waved the counter spell in her hand. Artride couldn’t face her, so she didn’t turn around when she said, ‘I have. He says he cannot change it, for it is basically set in stone. For it to work there has to be a queen *and* a king; and who knows that might not even work? For it says ruling *king*?’

Tirsa sat next to her in sympathy. ‘So what, you have to marry? Just grab the first guy you can find; the curse will be lifted and you can divorce him the following day.’

Artride suppressed a snigger.

‘Our bodies will have to meet.’

‘What?’ Tirsa’s eyes grew wide, forgetting the slab she held in her hand and what it read.

Artride turned round and quoted, glancing at the slab of wood, “‘Their two bodies shall be as one.’”

Tirsa followed her gaze and read once again the words of the counter spell. She was right.

‘So, you’ll have to sleep with him.’ She swallowed hard with a worried look. ‘Alright, but *then* you can divorce him ...’

‘Oh, Tirsa. Why does it all have to be so complicated?’

Tirsa stared at the counter spell again and her eyes suddenly opened wider and grew brighter.

‘It says ‘king and queen’, alright. But since *you* are the queen and there is no king, if you take it literally it will not work anyway!’

‘I cannot appreciate why you are so happy about that!’

‘No, I mean, it means we cannot follow it to the rule anyway, can we? So where does it say you have to marry?’ and she touched every word, every line. And when she did not get a response, ‘Nowhere! It says “the couple”; so it could even mean you; king *or* queen, it’s the same thing; it’s just a title, and you’re ...’ but she didn’t finish her sentence, however both thought the same thing, in unison, ‘*Queen*’.

~ ~ ~

It was just like one of her dreams, or was it one?

No, it was far too real for that. She could feel the wind and the cool whipping against her face, pulling at her clothes and stinging her eyes. And although the wind was as gentle as could be at this altitude, for a human this would mean freezing to death; but yet she still was human, the difference was that she possessed wings as a result of the gratitude of the TalamhClann. That seemed to include not much hindrance from the weather conditions. Surely it was the Windchildren making sure of that.

The snow-capped mountains below looked magnificent and she felt the invisible wings on her back moving, pushing her forward, without much effort. They must be huge to carry the weight of a human and fly at this speed.

And she was not alone.

When she looked to her right, she saw a tear stung Artride with widespread arms flying beside her. They both held their arms stretched next to them out of instinct, but there was really no need for that. It felt great to fly by themselves. It was the utmost sense of freedom. Not only would they be on time this way, but they would be able to use their wings

in the future. Secrecy was the only down to it. But at least they could share it together. They held hands in the air and felt power radiating from one to another.

Below was the wide mountain range, the woods and they could also see parts of Zoria and Razoras in the distance. After a day they'd already recognised the great mountain range between Ceartas and Dochas and flew lower to search for the wide swamp where they left Fiosa, Tirsa's horse. Soon they found it and landed on a safe spot, near the flower fields where she was grazing. Artride was amazed to see it was true; she had waited for Tirsa.

The meeting was touching, and the queen thought about her own stead who had died on the way, with pain in her heart.

They mounted and travelled in the direction of the border river. They took a different route, so as to avoid seeing the dead bodies of the poor horse and the two men. They travelled by night under the guiding light of a full moon and they reached Ceartas by morning.

They left the Magical Land of Dochas with mixed feelings.

'I have never been more afraid, Tirsa.'

She knew she spoke the truth; however, it wasn't so much fear for herself.

'I know.' And she remembered the words Kasching had spoken to her, "You need never be afraid again."

How ironic. No Windchild or magic could help her now.

'I will make sure you won't have to, trust me.' Tirsa spoke.

Artride was silent. She had expected that. Ever since she found out that the counter spell wasn't as straightforward, she had been quiet.

They camped shortly by the riverside.

‘What I feel for this country is the feeling you have for the mother who gave life to you. It’s unconditional love. I could never hate this country,’ Artride spoke softly.

‘And soon all the negative energy the curse holds on her will be gone and you will learn to love her again,’ Tirsa added, but Artride didn’t reply.

Tirsa inhaled the freshness of the new leaves and the flower scent in the air.

‘This is magic. Do you smell it and do you feel the soft breeze on your skin?’ and she picked up a small pebble; smoothly shaped. ‘This pebble once was a mountain and as harsh and sharp as it; before the waters curved and shaped it. Now after many centuries it has become like this, smooth and round,’ and she moved her tender fingers around it and caressed it like an animal.

‘But still it’s not the end of it. It has a soul now, can you feel it? It’s old and wise after all those lives; first as a mountain, then as being part of water; rivers, streams, sand, small creatures. Perhaps even the sea before it became part of this forest floor. It’s part of your country now! Now that is magic.’

Artride stared amazed at her, then smiled. ‘I have never thought about it like that.’

‘Everything has a soul; every rock, even the river and the wind, the TalamhClann taught me that ... and you did.’

Artride held her gaze longingly.

‘Oh, Tirs! What am I going to do?’

She bit her lip at that, for she knew what Artride meant.

‘And don’t say you want me to marry some man for a day and a night, I cannot bear it!’

‘With great power comes great sacrifice ...’ Tirsa said absently. ‘Isn’t that what Eolas said?’

Artride opened her mouth to protest, but shut it closed again, beaten; she knew she was right.

Tirsa glanced up at the sun and said, ‘Tomorrow morning early a waning moon will set. The first in three mornings; for the moon will have to meet the sun. And when the sun rises you’ll have to be ready to ...’ The queen started shaking her head in protest.

But more softly, Tirsa added, swallowing away her excitement, ‘You’ll have to marry tonight or ...’ And turned to face the queen and spoke vehemently, ‘Marry me.’

With big eyes and open mouth she faced Tirsa to see if she was serious.

‘What?’

‘You heard me.’ And she got up and knelt in front of the queen and smiled up at her.

‘I know, a bit cliché,’ and she reached out for her hand. ‘But I promise I will make up for it. Artride Cumhachd, will you marry me?’

‘Oh, Tirs, how I hoped you would say that,’ and tears came to her eyes. ‘In my dreams – for how can we? as long as Ceartas is under its curse? The Law book won’t allow it.’

‘I promise you I will marry you ... after.’

‘After?’ Artride raised one eyebrow and Tirsa rolled her eyes.

‘I know I promised I would avoid the cliché, didn’t I? Alright, here comes: Plan A: Let me be your queen. It won’t hurt to try. It’s after all a waning moon for *three* mornings ... And if it doesn’t work; if the curse won’t be lifted after we, well you know ... well then ... there’s still time to go ahead with plan B; to marry and then sleep with your king husband?’

‘Oh, Tirsa Lathabris, as much as I want this, don’t you see, that technically only in marriage you will be my queen and as we cannot legally marry before the curse is lifted, the counter spell won’t work!’

‘Ah, but who’s to say? Am I not your best friend, your ...soulmate? The keeper of your heart? Your heart’s queen? And the day after we’ll marry and when I will technically be your queen, it will still be a waning moon two days after and we’ll repeat the procedure then if necessary?’ Tirsa held her hands, stroking her fingers gently.

‘For magic to work, we have to believe in this!’

Artride’s face lit up at that, and she held her face cupped in her own hands.

‘You’re amazing.’ And she hugged her so close Tirsa thought she would crush her ribs.

They laughed. ‘It’s worth a try,’ Artride said.

‘You still haven’t said yes or no?’

‘Yes, yes, yes,’ she cried in her hair. ‘I love you, Tirsa.’

‘And I have loved you from the day we met, how can I stop now? You are the queen of my heart and I will be yours,’ she in return spoke tearfully, hoping her plan would work.

~ ~ ~

As soon as they crossed the Royal valley and neared castle Tarac they speeded their pace and galloped on Fiosa towards the gate.

The castle guard recognized their queen and quickly opened it for the two women on one horse.

Artride dismounted and ran towards the castle. Tirsa walked off towards the stables with her mount. The guards looked surprised and alarmed at her pace.

They bowed for her and said as one, 'Welcome back, your Highness.'

'Thank you, good men. Everything well?'

'Nothing out of the ordinary happened while you were gone, my Lady,' one said with questioning big eyes.

'Good. Now, go and find me some beeswax candles!' and she gestured at the heavy doors.

'My Lady?'

'You heard me: I need a black, a red, a white and a blue beeswax candle. Even if you have to knock on every door in Satrea, find me those!'

The guard scratched his stubble and repeated her words, then nodded, thinking the queen to have gone mad. She explained quickly, 'There will be a party. I'm getting married!'

They opened the doors for her and nodded.

'I shall see to it straight away, my Lady.' The guard smiled, relieved.

It felt as if she'd been away for years; so much she had changed in these last weeks. Life never would be the same again and looking at the castle she was bound to make some changes around this place too.

She climbed the winding stairs and noticed all was quiet in the castle.

Panting heavily she crossed many a floor, noticing the sun setting with a spreading red glow through the big oval windows on the marble staircase, and on her face. Artride moved on until she walked through a narrow corridor and stopped in front of a black door heavily locked. The Chamber of the Law Book.

Unlocking the door by touching the lock, by magic it clicked open; only Royalty could do that, she pushed the door gingerly open. She held

her breath.

The book will soon punish me for the death of my uncle and a slow death will befall me. How slow and how soon I do not know ...

~ ~ ~

With a dry throat and her heart heavily beating Tirsa walked over to the open black door and peeked in. The candles were lit in each corner and flickered; one red, one black, one blue and one white.

It was still dark; the night sky falling through the large oval window, but still she could see the sliver of the old waning moon rising in the night; its light falling on the long, black hair of her queen. And soon it would be the moment in between for the magic to work; the passing of the night meeting the new day empowered by the rising of both the sun *and* the moon at the same time.

‘You’re early,’ Artride said.

Tirsa smiled, ‘Of course.’ And she looked in awe at how stunning Artride was; she had bathed and was dressed in nothing but a thin light blue nightgown. She had to look away as not to be carried away too soon. She spotted the small round table with the closed thick book on top.

Artride had already removed the protecting cascade the book normally lay in.

‘Be careful not to touch it, Tirsa.’

‘I will. Er, I mean I won’t.’ And she looked at her and bit her lip in yearning.

And together they waited, in silence, the presence of the book so oppressing, and excited about what was to come; they could not talk or do anything else other than wait awkwardly.

And when at last the sun was on its way, they undressed. It wasn’t as if they hadn’t seen each other naked before, but this was different.

Slowly, Tirsa let her clothes drop on the floor and took Artride's face gently in her hands and their lips met. They kissed long and hungrily as if their lives depended on it, well Artride's did. Tirsa wrapped her arms around Artride's neck and Artride's hands glided over Tirsa's bare back and pressed her body against hers. Tirsa helped her out of her nightgown and started kissing her neck, shoulders and breasts and they laid down on the rug, their bodies and hair, black and gold, moving and merging as one in front of the book, the candles, the rising sun and the waning moon ...

~ ~ ~

When the sun rose higher and the moon went down and they had forgotten about the book and all around them, they felt a wind of change blowing through the room. They looked up from the rug. It had built up into a storm above the book; so vivid they had to close their ears against the sudden noise, and a reddish black light rose from the now opened book, lifting it up about five feet, before dropping it. Holding close to one another, the next thing they saw was black smoke rising and slowly circling from out of the book, leaving. And the reddish glow together with the thick black smoke drifted through the window, smashing it, leaving pieces of shattered glass on the windowsill and floor.

The shock overwhelmed them, but not just the quick departure of the curse they literally saw descending; no, Artride even felt it inside her body and her spirit, something evil was leaving them.

The two women stood and watched the book, surely empty now, but to be sure, Artride picked up one of the candles; the white one, and set the book on fire.

It burned on its altar, it burned like a normal book would; its cover and pages scorching, blistering and crumbling to ash.

Artride turned to face Tirsa, tears streaming down her face, who opened her arms and held her while she wept tears of joy.

‘It’s over Artride, truly over. Our lives can start now,’ she said stroking her hair. Artride spoke gratefully through her smile, ‘If I hadn’t had you, I would not have known what to do.’

‘Same here, my queen. Same here.’

~ ~ ~

‘Perhaps there will be a day kings and queens no longer will be needed,’ Artride said to her wife a couple of days later, sitting on a comfortable, broad rocking chair in the Royal Garden when they finally, after days of celebrating, were alone again. They had to speak to so many people and explain so many things and it had been tiring, but well worth it. Well, at least there had been a wedding. It was the most perfect wedding one could ever imagine and both wore the most stunning dresses, one light green for Tirsa and one pale blue for Artride. Elimar was present and so was Tirsa’s mother and her sister Fiosa; they were all surprised, but couldn’t be more pleased. As for the Ceartasians, well, people will be people and some were happy for them and some narrow-minded about it, but at least they could not be happier with the curse being lifted and the explanation from the queen that all this time it had been just that and not her, who saw to the penalties. At least now they knew she wasn’t cruel, that was a start. They would have to learn to get to know her now, and so they would as the queen’s plan was to be nearer the people and choose a government to help her rule. Together they would be strong.

‘People will always need leaders; that is the law of nature,’ Tirsa yawned. ‘And we shall make excellent leaders.’

‘Hmm, perhaps. However, when power falls into the wrong hands things could seriously go wrong. Look at Volmer and Sempervirens and

other dictators in the world. Those people were not chosen. They just took the power into their hands and sometimes people let them, out of fear or wanting new changes, hoping for a better future.'

'Apes, monkeys and wolves, our closest relatives have leaders and they know order. It does not mean it has to be a bad thing.'

'No, you're right of course. But they were chosen, sort of, or fought their way to become a leader, without too much bloodshed. Even you, you earned the rank of commander and most certainly earned the right to be my queen.' And she smiled warmly at her. Tirsa kissed her, caressing the ring on her finger with the blue gem; Artride's ring. Tirsa had given her a ring in return with a real diamond in it; she had bought it with all her savings in a neighbouring city. Artride had not expected this and felt a little guilty, but very honoured. Tirsa would have riches beyond her imagination, although Artride could finally share them with her people now, whereas before she was not allowed to. Times would change; she would make sure of that.

'But how can you still talk like this, after all you did both for Ceartas and Dochas? Believe me, you'll make the best queen ever, don't worry.'

Humbly she lowered her face.

'It is a great responsibility, one that is new to me, but as long as I have you by my side to help me, I will be alright.'

'True, for now that Ceartas has not got one, but *two* queens, what could go wrong?'

And they smiled and walked back hand-in-hand towards the castle. Much work was to be done yet, but there was enough time now, at last.

THE END



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